













**"MISS SPITFIRE" AT SCHOOL'**







The play in the second half was, if possible, faster than in the first.

# **“MISS SPITFIRE” AT SCHOOL**

**BY  
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# "MISS SPITFIRE" AT SCHOOL

## CHAPTER I

### THE GIRL FROM CANADA

THE room was a charming one with three large windows, one of them of the "french" variety leading into a well-kept flower garden, furnished with taste but not over-crowded and with the bright sunshine of a May afternoon lighting it very happily.

But the three occupants of the room gave no impression of happiness.

Miss Lancaster, the headmistress of Rolsham Manor School felt her heart sink a little as she looked from the sullen face of her new pupil to the worried one of the girl's uncle. Apparently it was going to be no easy task to manage this undisciplined, motherless, fatherless girl.

"I think that is all I wanted to ask you, Miss Lancaster," said the man, rising and speaking a little nervously. "I—I hope Gay will be a good girl and give you as little trouble as possible."

*Gay!* What a remarkably inappropriate name for the very personification of sullenness and disgust who

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had sat almost entirely silent all through the interview, barely answering when addressed, a disagreeable expression spoiling her appearance completely.

"We will do our best to make her happy," said Miss Lancaster. "Come along, Gay," she added, holding out her hand, "and say good-bye to your uncle. He is just going."

Gay sat still, making no sign that she had heard beyond a slight deepening of the frown between her brows, and her uncle, hastily crossing to her side, took her hand and stooped to kiss her.

But she drew away and glared at him angrily.

"You *know* I don't want to stay here," she exclaimed. "I don't want to be at school at all. I wanted to stay in Canada."

"My dear child," replied her uncle, "that was out of the question. You could not possibly have been allowed to live on the ranch by yourself."

"I wouldn't have *been* by myself," said the girl, impatiently. "Old Mary would have looked after me and her son and the others."

"Don't be foolish, Gay," retorted her uncle, evidently at the end of his patience. "Your father's daughter could not be allowed to run wild with nobody but servants to look after her and grow up into a rough, ignorant hoyden. Besides, it was his wish that you should come to school in England, and there is no more to be said."

Gay sprang up in a blaze of wrath.

"H-how dare you! He was *my* daddy, and al-always wanted me to be h-happy, and y-you have no *right* to

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mention him to m-me," she cried, almost incoherent in her rage.

"You forget," said her uncle, quietly, "that he was my brother, and that I loved him, too; loved him before you were ever thought of. It is because of that love that I am trying to do my best for you, trying to do what he would wish, even though you make it so very difficult. It depends upon yourself, Gay, whether you are happy here or not, but here you must stay. Good-bye!"

He pressed his hand on her shoulder a moment, then turned again to Miss Lancaster, and in a few moments Gay Hamilton was left alone in the room.

Immediately she slid down in her chair and hid her face in her hands, no longer a defiant rebel but just a little crumpled figure of woe.

"I shall be miserable—I know I shall," she whispered, half-aloud. "Oh, Daddy, Daddy! Why did you die and leave me all alone? Why couldn't we have gone on living together on the dear, beautiful old ranch?"

There was a catch in her throat, but she would not give way to tears—somebody might come in at any moment.

*What* a place this was! *How* she would hate living in a crowd! Why, there was even no corner anywhere where she could have a good cry in peace.

There! She knew it! Footsteps outside the door!

She sat up very straight and the frown returned to her face. These horrid people should have no part in her sorrow. She supposed she would have to stay here,

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there was nowhere else to go. If she ran away and went to her uncle, he would promptly send her back again, and there was no one else in this horrible strange country to whom she could turn.

Yes, she would have to stay, but if Professor Hamilton thought she was going to settle down and be meek and mild as though butter wouldn't melt in her mouth, he was very much mistaken.

The door opened and a girl about her own age looked in and then came forward with a friendly smile.

"You are Gay Hamilton, the new girl, aren't you?" she asked.

"Yes," muttered Gay.

"You are going to be in our dorm," the new-comer went on, ignoring Gay's lack of responsiveness. "Miss Lancaster asked me to come along and show you where you are going to be. There are five of us—six with you. I am Mary Diana Allerton. Most people call me by both my names—Mary Diana—I don't know why, but some of my chums call me M.D. for short. I will introduce you to the others in the dorm. They are a jolly lot, you'll like them. We are just busy unpacking and putting our things away. Come along! Is this yours? I'll carry it for you."

She stooped to pick up a small suit-case, but Gay interposed.

"Thank you," she said, stiffly, "I'll carry it myself."

"All right," replied Mary Diana, quite unperturbed. "Being a new girl is pretty rotten, isn't it?" she went on with a sunny smile. "We have all been through it. I know I thought I was never going to be happy again

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and now I love every stick and stone of the blessed old place, to say nothing of the people in it."

Even Gay could not entirely ignore Mary Diana's laughing expression as she held the door open for the new girl, and a tiny flicker of an answering smile dispelled the gloom on her own face for a moment.

"I don't think I shall ever do anything but hate it," she said.

Mary Diana laughed, a delicious little gurgle of amusement.

"You *wait!*" she said. "By the end of the term you'll love it as much as any of us. You are just the sort."

"I'm *not*—I'm sure I'm not," declared Gay with emphasis.

Mary Diana screwed up her face into a funny little grimace that, in spite of herself, brought once again that little flicker of amusement into Gay's eyes.

The two girls crossed the hall, mounted a wide, shallow staircase and walked along a corridor from which several doors opened, and everywhere there was a babel of girls' voices.

"You have seen Miss Lancaster, haven't you?" asked Mary Diana. "Isn't she a dear?"

Gay's eyes opened wide with astonishment.

"You—you mean the headmistress," she gasped.

"Of course I do," answered Mary Diana, laughing at the other's expression. "We all fairly *adore* her."

"What a queer idea!" remarked Gay. "To be fond of a teacher! Why, they have always been my worst enemies. Hardly any governess stayed more than three

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weeks, and we always fought like Kilkenny cats, and at last Daddy had to teach me himself and——"

But mention of her father made her stop and turn her head away.

"Here we are!" said Mary Diana, pausing with her hand on the knob of one of the doors. "Just hark to the row they are making; you'd never think there were only four girls in there would you?"

There *was* a clatter of tongues in the room, but Gay knew that the other girl had only waited a moment in order to give her time to recover herself, and was conscious of a tiny feeling of gratitude.

Silence fell as Mary Diana opened the door and four girls turned to gaze a little curiously at the new-comer.

"Girls," said Mary Diana, "this is Gay Hamilton; she is going to be in the dorm here with us. Gay, these are Joyce Faraday, Maisie Emsworth, Nora Baynton and Cecily Frinton, usually called 'Carrots' or 'Rufus,' because of her hair."

Each girl, as her name was mentioned, stepped forward with a smile and offered her hand, but each successive smile was a little more forced than its predecessor, for Gay's face remained entirely unresponsive and she only just touched the tips of the outstretched fingers.

An uncomfortable pause ensued; the new-comer's advent had decidedly damped the cheeriness of the gathering.

Mary Diana hastened to provide a diversion.

"Come along, Gay," she said with rather exaggerated brightness, "you'd better begin your unpacking; we have got ours nearly half done."

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Gay raised her eyebrows.

"Do you unpack your things yourselves?" she asked.  
"Why don't the servants do it?"

Mary Diana laughed and dived into her suit-case.

"There'd have to be a big staff to unpack the belongings of somewhere about a hundred girls," she remarked.

"I've always had things done for me," muttered Gay.

"You come from Canada, don't you?" asked Cecily, of the red hair. "I always thought Canadians were such capable people, never at a loss in an emergency."

"Well—what of it?" demanded Gay. . .

"Only that if you can't unpack your own things—well—you must be pretty helpless."

Gay glared angrily at her and sat down on her bed.

"I'm not going to do it," she said determinedly.

"Look here," put in Mary Diana, "we'll help you, we've nearly done ours. It won't take long. Where are your keys? It has to be done, you know, or there'll be trouble. Come along, there's a dear!"

She laid her hand on Gay's shoulder with a persuasive smile, and the new girl rose slowly and from the small suit-case she had carried, provided the keys necessary for her larger luggage.

"I don't want anybody but you to touch my things," she said, addressing Mary Diana alone. .

"Nobody *wants* to touch them," began Cecily, a little heatedly, but Mary Diana laughed a bit forcedly and flung a pair of stockings at her friend.

"Shut up, Rufus!" she murmured, and the red-haired girl turned away to her own belongings.



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Cecily Frinton was generally a pretty even-tempered little girl, in spite of the brilliant hue of her hair, but at the moment she was feeling decidedly ruffled.

What a bore the gloomy new girl was going to be! Generally, on the first day of a new term, this particular dormitory was one of the cheeriest, happiest spots in the school, and now this stuck-up, bad-tempered piece from the other side of the ocean was playing most successfully the part of a very efficient wet blanket. Bother the girl! If she kept on like this, what a pleasant term they were going to have!

Gay had subsided again on the edge of her bed, and sat watching Mary Diana dealing with her belongings, making no offer to help, and the other four girls carried on a rather stilted, desultory conversation, and were very relieved when the gong for tea sounded through the house.

From her place between Mary Diana and Joyce Faraday, Gay took stock of the girls among whom, she supposed, she would be spending the better part of the next few years of her life. She looked at them with prejudiced eyes, and decided that she didn't like them. Mary Diana Allerton was passable, but for the others, she had no use for any of them. Many of them were looking at the new girl with some curiosity, but Gay Hamilton remained composed, and returned their gaze steadily.

Having been separated during the holidays, the girls seemed to have much to talk about on this the first day of a new term, and there was a regular hum of conversation, which, though eager enough, did not

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seem to interfere very much with the satisfying of healthy young appetites.

Mary Diana passed Gay a plate of bread and butter, but the latter shook her head with a gesture of distaste.

"No, thank you," she said.

Miss Denver, one of the older mistresses and second in command under Miss Lancaster, was in charge at the moment, and, noticing the little incident, fixed her eyes on Gay.

"Don't you want any bread and butter?" she asked.

"Not bread and butter like that," replied Gay coolly, "I like it thin."

The hum of conversation ceased and everybody's attention was fixed on this curious new girl, and one or two of the girls tittered.

Just a tiny little flicker of amusement gleamed in the teacher's eyes before she spoke.

"I imagine," she said, "that if that bread and butter is good enough for the other girls it is good enough for you."

"I am sorry," said Gay, "but I cannot eat it."

"You must please yourself," retorted Miss Denver, "but if you do not choose to eat that, you must go without."

Once more Mary Diana proffered the despised plate, but once more Gay shook her head and said, "No, thank you!"

She leaned back in her chair, only occasionally taking a sip of tea while the buzz of talk began again.

Nobody took much notice of her, for even Mary

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Diana seemed to find that the problem of the new girl was a little beyond her.

When the meal was finished the girls dispersed, and, crossing the hall, Mary Diana touched Gay's arm.

"We are going to our class-rooms," she said, "to look out our books and arrange our desks for tomorrow's work. Will you come?"

Gay hesitated; the great door of the main entrance stood wide open and her glance went longingly to the still bright out of doors.

"I have no books," she said, "and I don't know yet what form I am to be in. It is hardly worth while my coming with you. I would rather go outside for a bit."

"B-but we're not supposed to go outside just now," was Mary Diana's reply.

"Besides," added Maisie Emsworth, "we don't use the main entrance except on special occasions, we use the side door."

"What!" exclaimed Gay. "Can't we even go out into the grounds when we like? And what's a door *for*?"

Immediately, she turned from the group of girls and marched straight out of the main door.

The maidens left behind turned and looked at one another.

"Well! If that isn't a queer specimen!" remarked Joyce.

"She's *asking* for trouble—in *lumps*," added Cecily, nodding her red head, "if she continues to go on as she has begun."

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"Rather!" agreed Maisie. "But that's *her* funeral. The trouble is that she is in our dormitory. If she is going to hold herself aloof like a kind of royal princess she is going to be the jolly old limit. We were such a cheery united little party last term.

"I know," said Mary Diana, slowly. "I quite agree that at present she is the limit, but personally, I am inclined to like her, and when we know her better I believe we shall find her much nicer than the first impression we have of her."

"Plenty of room for improvement," muttered Maisie.

Mary Diana took no notice of the interruption.

"Another thing," she went on, "I think we ought to make allowances for her. She comes from Canada, and feels a stranger in a strange land; she has just lost her father, and absolutely hates the idea of coming to school—or England either for that matter."

"Where's her mother?" asked Nora.

"Died when she was a baby, I believe," replied Mary Diana.

"Poor kid," murmured Maisie "she seems pretty lonely."

"She *is*," answered Mary Diana. "That's why Miss Lancaster put her in our dorm and suggested that we should do our best to make her feel at home."

"Some job!" muttered Rufus, shrugging her shoulders. "But I suppose we shall have to try and be polite."

"That certainly would be 'some job' for you," laughed Mary Diana. "Anyway, you go on to the class-room. I am going to slip down to the side door

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and see if I can persuade the wanderer to return before anyone finds out that she has been a-roving."

When Gay passed through the great door, she breathed a sigh of relief as she drew the fresh evening air into her lungs.

Desperately she had felt that she must be alone for a few minutes, must get rid of this dreadful crowd of strangers for a while. Slowly she walked along the front of the house, through a little green door that led into a beautifully-kept flower garden, then through another door in a high brick wall to an equally well-kept kitchen garden. How trim and tidy everything was!

In one corner a boy was busy hoeing, and Gay walked in his direction. Here was someone who was not one of the ubiquitous females, and in some way he reminded her of some of the workers on the Canadian ranch.

"Good evening!" she said, quite pleasantly. "Where does that gate lead to?" indicating a fine wrought-iron gate in the high walls.

"Out into the playing-fields, miss," replied the lad, respectfully touching his cap.

"Thank you," said Gay. "I suppose you are one of the gardeners."

"I'm the garden boy, miss," he answered with a grin.

"What's the difference?" asked Gay.

"Old Bates is the gardener, and does all the nice jobs and I does all the dirtiest work for him," answered the boy.

"What a shame!" exclaimed Gay.

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"Oh, I don't mind, miss," was the reply, "I'm as strong as strong, an' like plenty to do."

"Aren't you working late?"

"Just a bit, miss, 'cos old Bates wants this bed done to-day."

"What's your name?" demanded Gay.

"Dan Burfield, miss."

"My name's Gay Hamilton," said the girl, "and I've just come from Canada. I *hate* England."

The garden boy's eyes opened widely.

"*Hate England!*" he cried. "Why, I think it is the finest place in all the world."

"How do you know? What other places have you seen?" demanded Gay.

Dan grinned, and taking off his cap, rubbed his head.

"Well—now you ask, miss," he said, "I ain't never bin more'n ten miles from this village, but I don' see how any place *could* be finer."

"Wait until you see Canada!" said Gay.

Dan rammed his cap down on his head and looked a little obstinate.

"I don't want no place but England. It's good enough for me. Excuse me, miss, but you ain't ever bin to school afore have yer?"

"Why, how do you know?" asked Gay.

"'Cos ye're out here an' the other young ladies are indoors, an'——"

"And I am breaking a rule, I suppose you mean. Bother the place! It's going to be all rules, rules, *rules*, and I hate them. Why can't we all please ourselves?"

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"Dunno, miss!" was Dan's helpful answer.

"Well, I'm not going to fuss myself over their old rules," declared Gay. "I mean to do as I like as much as possible."

Dan dug his hoe several times into the ground, then raised his eyes and looked at the girl's gloomy, rebellious face.

"'Twon't make yer any happier, I'm thinkin'," he said bluntly.

"Why not?" asked Gay.

"Well—Dad says," replied Dan, "that it is allus wiser to be on the side of law an' order. He says that the folks as rebels an' wants their own way too much are like a chap as tries to kick a great rock outter his way—he hurts his own toe more'n he hurts the rock. Beg pardon, miss," he added, flushing uncomfortably as he realised that he, the garden boy, was airing his views, or rather, his father's views, to one of the young ladies of Rolsham Manor School.

But Gay smiled graciously.

"I expect you are right," she said, "but that does not make me love rules any better. Can you show me the way to the side door?"

"Yes, miss," replied Dan, and led her to the iron gate and directed her from there.

The girl wandered on across the playing-fields. It was a lovely evening, the rich fresh green of the grass and the soft colouring of the sky fascinated Gay, and, in some measure, soothed the unrest within her, so that presently, she turned and made her way to the side door that Dan had indicated.

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A hand waved to her, and she realised that someone was standing waiting for her just inside the doorway.

"That's all right!" remarked Mary Diana in tones of satisfaction. "No one has missed you yet, but Miss Lancaster is interviewing new girls and may send for you at any moment."

"One would think," grumbled Gay, "that I had committed some dreadful crime. What harm was there in going out into the grounds?"

"No harm exactly," replied Mary Diana, "but it is the rule here to put our desks in order after tea the first day, and rules have to be kept."

"*Why* must there be fusty rules about every little thing?" objected Gay. "Why can't we do as we like?"

"So we do—in reason," answered Mary Diana. "As a matter of fact, compared with some schools, we have very few restrictions and rules, but those that there are we are expected to keep. After all, you know, with so many girls living together there must be *some* law and order. Just imagine what would have happened in the war if all the men had decided to please themselves and refused to obey their officers. There'd have been a fine old muddle, wouldn't there? Even worse than there was."

"Umph!" said Gay, and made no further remark. First Dan Burfield and then Mary Diana Allerton preaching about law and order! Did these queer English people ever think of anything else?

The two girls reached the class-room and several voices informed them that Miss Lancaster had that



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minute sent a message to say she wished to see Miss Gay Hamilton.

"Just in time," laughed Mary Diana. "Come along, I'll show you the way."

Meanwhile, Dan Burfield, having finished his job, dug his old bicycle out of the potting shed and sped away home to the cottage where he lived with his father and step-mother and little half-sister.

When Daniel Burfield was quite a young man he was attracted by pretty, headstrong Lettice Day, the village beauty, but she had also taken the fancy of a young man, a stranger to these parts, who had drifted to the village one memorable summer, and Lettice had married him and gone away with him. After a while, Daniel married quiet little Mary Smith, who died when her small son, young Dan, was little more than a baby. A few years later, Lettice returned to the village, a widow. Life had not been kind to her, but it had taught her many things, and when Daniel asked her to marry him and look after him and his boy, she agreed, and made an excellent wife and mother.

Young Dan could not have loved her more if she had been his own mother, and he fairly idolised the baby sister who came to be the joy of the little cottage.

The boy sat down to his tea, and after satisfying his hunger somewhat, began to talk of the day's happenings.

Among other things he told of his encounter with the strange new girl at the school who hated England.

"Rum sort of name she's got, too," he went on. "Fancy calling a girl 'Gay!' She said her name was Gay Hamilton."

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Young Dan was deep in his story, and Daniel pulling at his pipe, and neither of them noticed that Lettice started and nearly dropped the cups and saucers she was putting together on the tray, or that she suddenly lost her healthy colour.

After a moment or two she recovered her equanimity and, standing behind Dan's chair, asked a few questions.

"What did she look like—this new girl?"

"Oh, I dunno," said Dan, carelessly. "Same as mos' other gals."

"Dark or fair?"

"Dunno—dark, I think. Anyway her eyes were dark as dark."

"About what age is she?"

"Oh, thirteen—maybe fourteen—young-er than me, anyway. What yer want to know for? D'ye know her?"

"No—no—not at all," replied Lettice. "What part of Canada did she come from?"

"Dunno," said Dan again, rising and stretching his arms above his head. "She didn't say, an' I don' care. Wherever it was, it ain't any finer than England, she can say what she likes."

And Lettice could get no more information out of him, but she sighed as she took little Daisy up to bed.

## CHAPTER II

### A LONELY FURROW

GAY came through her interview with Miss Lancaster better than might have been expected, better than she herself had intended.

In spite of the trouble there had always been with governesses, she was no dullard, and in her haphazard way had succeeded in imbibing a certain amount of knowledge, and when her father had taken her in hand himself she had thoroughly enjoyed the hours given up to the task of supplying her with some sort of an education.

She had meant to appear as stupid and ignorant as possible, but there was something about Miss Lancaster, quiet though she was, that made it impossible to play any such trick with her, and, to her own surprise, Gay found herself answering questions meekly and intelligently, and the mistress was not long in deciding that she was qualified to compete with girls of her own age in the lower fifth.

After leaving Miss Lancaster's room, she made her way to the form class-room and was greeted cheerily.

"Hello! Here you are!" called Mary Diana. "How did you get on? What form are you in?"

"The lower fifth, I believe," returned Gay, rather ungraciously.

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"Oh, good for you!" smiled Mary Diana. "Then we shall be in the same classes as well as in the same dormitory."

Gay had no answering smile. She gave her shoulders the tiniest little shrug, which said quite plainly she really did not care a penny piece in *what* form or dormitory she happened to be.

Deep in her heart she felt a tiny sting of discomfort. She knew quite well that Mary Diana Allerton was trying to be kind to a new girl, but she had made up her mind that nothing should make her happy at the school Professor Hamilton had chosen, and her pride would not let her be influenced even by Mary Diana's sunny friendliness.

So she turned away and, crossing the room, sat on a chair a little apart from everyone, her back towards the lively group by the window.

All the same, she found herself listening to all that they were saying.

Naturally, they were discussing holiday doings, and all of them seemed to have fathers and mothers and brothers and sisters, happy cheery family parties, that Gay, having lived all alone with her father, knew nothing about.

"How is the irrepressible Pete, M.D.?" asked Maisie, "As irrepressible as ever?"

"Oh, rather!" answered Mary Diana, with a tender little smile for her harum scarum twin brother. "He was only home a fortnight, but during that time, he managed to get himself nearly drowned, fell out of a tree and nearly broke his neck, nearly shot the

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chauffeur with a shot gun and nearly set the house on fire."

"Quite a full fortnight," remarked Nora as the girls laughed at young Peter's escapades.

"Anyway," said Joyce, "as long as they were all 'nearlys' and not 'quites', it didn't matter very much."

"No," agreed Mary Diana; "except that mother says his goings-on nearly turn her hair grey."

"Another 'nearly'," laughed Rufus. "But what can you expect from a boy! They are pretty much all alike. I only wish our young hopeful's antics would turn *my* hair grey. It would improve my appearance vastly."

"You goose!" said Maisie, passing her hand over the speaker's flaming locks. "It's *lovely* hair. I only wish mine was that colour."

"Did you do anything special in the hols, Rufus?" asked Joyce.

"Oh, I had gastritis," replied the red-headed one.

A peal of laughter greeted this statement.

"What a treat!" gurgled Mary Diana.

"You can laugh," protested Rufus, "but I can tell you it was no laughing matter."

"Were you at home?" asked Nora.

"No, worse luck, I was *not*," replied Rufus. "You see, when the holidays began, Dad and Mum were travelling on the continent. Brother Jim went home with one of his dearly-beloved chums, but none of my friends or relations seemed particularly anxious to put me up or put up with me, so——"

A chorus interrupted her.

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"Why didn't you tell us?"

"You could have come to us, you ninny."

"I should have loved to have taken you home with me."

"Well—you *are* a silly little silly. We should all have been glad to put up with you."

Rufus smiled and bent her head in acknowledgment.

"That was just it," she said. "I should have had to have divided myself into four. And anyway, it was just as well. I am pretty certain that none of your mothers would have enjoyed entertaining me *and* my gastritis."

"What did you do, then?" inquired Maisie.

"I went to stay with old Nannie who was nurse to Jim and me. She lives in a delightful old-fashioned, rose-covered cottage, and generally Jim and I love staying there, whether singly or together. But somehow, it is not the place in which to indulge in illness. My dears, if ever you have to stay in bed more than a day or two, choose a room to be ill in that has plain walls. For pity's sake, don't have paper with a pattern."

"Whatever difference can that make?" demanded the chorus.

"A very hefty difference, as I know to my cost," declared Rufus. "Old Nannie's best room had a paper sprinkled with little bunches of tiny pink roses and between them, all over the place, were miles of brown squiggly stalks. You never would have believed the number of faces and figures that were hidden in that abominable wallpaper pattern; scores of them,

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pretty girls and ugly ones, old men and women, clowns and goblins, soldiers and bishops, full face and side face and everything else. There was one bit of brown stalk, about two inches long that was like a drawing of a rugger player. He was running hard, the ball held to his chest with one hand, and the other hand flung out behind him as though to ward off a tackler. He was repeated again and again all over the wall. Then you looked at that bit of stalk another way and it wasn't a footballer at all; it was a grotesque profile. The ball was now the eye, the man's shin and turned up big foot made the chin, and the outflung arm was now a rampant forelock. Then you saw a quite respectable dog's head, a few touches with a pencil would have made a lovely airedale with a brown collar, and suddenly you realised that the collar was part of that old footballer."

"Go on," urged the girls when Rufus stopped for breath.

"There was a hairy rug, too, by the side of the bed," Rufus continued, "and *that* made faces as well. One morning I could see an exact likeness of our old churchwarden at home, billy-goat beard and all. But the doctor came and put his foot on it, and when he went away, the churchwarden had gone, too."

"What a sad loss!" laughed Mary Diana, "Were you delirious?"

"No, I was *not*," replied Rufus, with dignity. "Neither was I afflicted with *delirium tremens*."

"Did you do nothing but gastricise all the hols., then?" asked Joyce.

"Oh, dear me, no!" was the reply. "When Dad and Mum heard I was ill, they flew over from Paris and almost as soon as they arrived I began to get better, and they trotted me off to Torquay. Jimmy-boy joined us, and we had a gorgeous time at the hotel. By the way, Gay," she went on, addressing that silent young lady, "there were some people of your name staying there, a Professor John Hamilton and a boy named David Hamilton, his nephew. Are they by any chance related to you?"

"Maybe," replied Gay, "but I have no interest in anybody of my name in England."

"Haven't you?" said Rufus. "Then it is your loss, for both the Professor and David were jolly good sorts. I only wish I had an uncle and cousin like them."

"Tastes differ!" was all Gay vouchsafed in answer, and nobody made any further attempt to draw her into conversation.

Long after everybody had retired to bed, Cecily Frinton woke up from her beauty sleep and was sure she heard something very like a stifled sob from the bed nearest to hers, and was conscious of a wave of compassionate feeling in her heart. She would have liked to slip across and try to comfort this lonely, difficult new girl, for Rufus was essentially warm-hearted and generous, but regretfully she decided that she would probably only meet with a rebuff. In her present mood, Gay Hamilton must be left alone in her unhappiness.



## CHAPTER III

### FIFTH FORM<sup>s</sup>—UPPER AND LOWER

ROLSHAM MANOR was a fine old Jacobean house, for many generations the possession of one family, but the last of the line was a middle-aged bachelor who preferred town to country and was glad to sell the place for the good price the school was ready to pay. The school was divided into four "houses," called after Mary, Queen of Scots' ladies, the "four Marys," Mary Beaton, Mary Seaton, Mary Carmichael and Mary Hamilton. Beaton and Seaton occupied respectively the east and west wings of the old house itself, but Carmichael and Hamilton were housed in separate buildings in the grounds, planned as far as possible in the same style as the main house.

Mary Diana Allerton and her friends occupied No. Four Dormitory in Beaton which was only divided by the width of a corridor from No. Four in Seaton. The fifth form at Rolsham Manor was as a house divided against itself. According to the lower fifth, the upper fifth gave itself airs, and according to the upper fifth, the lower fifth needed keeping in its place, and Mary Diana and her friends objected, declaring that the girls just above them were ever so much more "bossy" than the bigger girls in the sixth form.

## Fifth Form—Upper and Lower 25

Helen Bracefield, the captain, was deservedly popular in the school, and most of the prefects were voted "quite decent," therefore the lower fifth would have done anything for any of them—"in reason"—and never resented being pulled up by any one of them when necessary.

"*But*," declared Mary Diana at an indignation meeting held at the end of last term, "when it comes to those folks in the upper fifth looking down their noses at us and daring to criticise and find fault, it is decidedly another matter."

In which the meeting entirely concurred. . .

Veronica Warner was a special aversion, and, unfortunately, she inhabited the neighbouring dormitory, No. Four in Seaton. She always treated them as though they were children of the lower school or nonentities of the miserable fourth, and behaved generally as if she were all but a prefect, and when, one never-to-be-forgotten day, she calmly told Cecily Frinton to go and clean her dirty nails, the fat was in the fire. Naturally!

Rufus did not deign to explain that she had been weeding in her garden plot and had not yet had time to wash her hands. Without vouchsafing a word, she had slapped Veronica's face hard and then hurried post haste to summon the clan and explain how she had been insulted. To make matters worse, Miss Denver, to whom Veronica had complained, had landed Rufus with a hundred lines because of the slap, and waved the "insult" aside as not worth bothering about.

Score for Veronica!

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It was not much of an incident in itself, but it acted as the last straw. The smouldering indignation flared up into a blaze of rivalry, a rivalry that in part, was harmless enough, for the two sets of girls worked hard and played hard to beat one another; but, unfortunately, there was sometimes a certain amount of feeling in the matter which spoiled the otherwise quite healthy competition. Gay Hamilton noticed on the first night in her dormitory that the other five girls seemed to be expecting something to happen. One and another would steal to the door and listen, then come back with a smile and a murmured, "All serene—nothing doing to-night."

"I hardly expected it," said Mary Diana, when it had happened two or three times. "They would know that we would be on the *qui vive* to-night. They will wait until they think we are getting slack and then they will come."

"Besides," added Joyce, "things have not settled down yet, and mistresses and prefects may be hovering round to see that everybody is in her own bed and everything all right."

"Yes, I think we are pretty safe to-night," agreed Mary Diana as she hopped into bed and snuggled down under the bed-clothes.

A week passed and Gay had, to a certain extent, settled down, though in her classes, out of sheer perversity, she persisted in doing less than her best and stayed obstinately near the bottom, to the exasperation of the teachers, who knew quite well that she could do much better if she would.

## Fifth Form—Upper and Lower 27

In spite of herself, she began to find that the girls interested her more than she would own, and occasionally she was conscious of a wistful longing to be friends, especially with the little group in the dormitory. But her pride would not let her make advances, and they, though always polite, allowed her to go her own way.

Only Mary Diana went a little further than mere politeness.

Gay had never had any opportunity to join in team games for she had had very little to do with other young people, and at first, she could not understand the keen interest that her companions took in them.

Cricket was not compulsory, but Gay soon began to wish it had been, for then the matter would have been taken out of her hands; her vow not to settle down happily would become null and void, and if her detested uncle purred and said he knew how it would be, she could retort: "I could not help myself." But harder than looking on at cricket it was to stand idly by and watch the girls playing tennis, for that was a game she *could* play and she loved it.

Many hours her father had spent coaching her, and he had been almost as elated as she the first time she succeeded in beating him.

Perhaps it would have been better if he had not spent so much time on the game, for then events that had happened on the ranch and about which Gay knew nothing might never have taken place. When she watched the girls of Rolsham Manor on the courts, she felt very little more than contempt for most of the decidedly amateurish efforts, but there were some

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really good players—players whom she would have loved to pit her powers against. Once or twice she was somewhat tentatively invited to join in a four, but her decision to hold herself aloof from the school life as much as possible was too recent to be set aside, and she quietly but firmly declined, and the girls, thinking that perhaps she could not, as well as would not, play, left her alone.

Deep in her heart she knew she was behaving very foolishly, and, as some of the girls would have said "cutting off her nose to spite her face." Besides, even in that first week—though she had been so certain that she would never like any of the girls—when they were laughing and talking together, arguing over all kinds of things, chaffing one another and evidently as full of the joy of life as they could well be, she found herself once or twice, vaguely wishing that she could be one of them, taken right into the inner circle of this very happy group of friends. It must be delightful to be liked and admired as much as were Mary Diana and Rufus.

And then would come the thought of the uncle whom, she told herself, had treated her so unjustly and whom she loathed, and the desire to leave her lonely furrow would evaporate once more into thin air.

## CHAPTER IV

### AN AFTERNOON RAMBLE

MISS DOROTHY GRAHAM was one of the youngest of the mistresses at Rolsham Manor School, so young that she hardly looked much older than some of the sixth form girls, and so pretty, that, behind her back, many of the girls called her "Dolly Dimples." Not that the name suited her, for she was anything but the pretty-pretty, empty-headed creature that it implied; she had plenty of character as well as good looks.

She was a tremendous favourite in the school, and the girls respected her as well as loved her.

One lovely May afternoon, the maidens of the lower fifth beamed with satisfaction when she announced that she proposed to take them to the neighbouring Yellowlea Wood to search for botanical specimens that she required for a lecture.

As it was the usual half holiday the ramble was optional, but most of the girls assented eagerly to the proposition.

Gay said nothing, but Mary Diana noticed the gleam that had come momentarily into her eyes.

"Coming, Gay?" she asked. "You'll like it; we always enjoy a ramble with Dolly Dimples. She knows all the wild flowers and can tell you all kinds of interesting things."

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And Gay, who had hardly been outside the school gates except for sedate walks taken in a two and two procession along the roads for the sake of exercise, agreed to be of the party.

How often had her father told her of the beauties of an English wood in spring or early summer, especially a bluebell wood, which Mary Diana assured her this was. And "hateful England" though it was, she had to admit to herself that the reality far surpassed anything she had ever imagined. It was a revelation to her beauty-loving soul. She felt happier than she had done since leaving Canada, and slipped away to enjoy the beauty of it all by herself, dreaming lovely girlish dreams, forgetting her hatred of the new life, forgetting all her troubles, forgetting everything but the glory all around her. Suddenly she was roused out of her reverie by a movement in the underwood and a squeal as of something in mortal pain, and in a moment was down on her knees wrestling with a poacher's trap that was holding a little rabbit prisoner by one of its hind legs. She soon found she could not open the trap unaided, and raised her voice, hoping some of the other girls would hear her.

"Mary Diana! Mary Diana!" she called. Then again: "Mary Diana! Come here, quick!"

"Where are you?" came the reply from some distance, and as Gay called again she heard the sound of running feet, and soon Mary Diana and Rufus and one or two of the others appeared.

"Oh, poor little thing! What a shame!" exclaimed Mary Diana while ohs and ahs of compassion came

## An Afternoon Ramble 31

from the other girls, and between them they soon had the little creature free, but they realised that it was very badly hurt.

Gay gathered it tenderly into her arms and turned to Mary Diana.

"What can we do?" she asked.

"Let's find Dolly," said Mary Diana, "and see what she says."

When the young teacher saw the group of girls approaching her, she thought from their aspect that some accident had happened and hastened to meet them.

"Oh, Miss Graham," cried Gay, eagerly, "we found this poor little rabbit in a trap—it's dreadfully hurt and we don't know what to do."

Miss Graham knew quite well that the kindest thing to do would be to take the suffering animal to the head keeper's cottage not far away and get the man to put it out of its misery. But one glance at Gay made her hesitate, for here was an utterly transformed Gay, a Gay with eyes full of compassion, her cheeks glowing with the intensity of her feelings, all her sullen listlessness vanished.

"So she *can* feel, after all," thought Miss Graham, "and what a difference expression makes—the child looks quite lovely."

"See here," she said aloud, "come with me, we'll take it to the doctor, it's not far to his house in the village. Mind you girls get into no mischief while I am gone. Come along, Gay!"

So Gay and Dolly Dimples hastened away side by



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side, the former carrying the wounded patient as carefully as might be.

Doctor Terence O'Connor was Miss Lancaster's nephew and for some time he had lived in the picturesque little village, and doctored the country folk in and around it and attended to the ailments of the pupils of Rolsham Manor School when necessary. He had been partner with and afterwards succeeded an old man, "the old doctor," who had had the practice for nearly half a century, and so was generally known as "the young doctor," or just "Dr. Terence."

He had a way with him, had Dr. Terence, and his patients often said that just his cheery presence made them feel better, and a friend of his aunt's, visiting once at the big hospital where he had trained, said she would never forget seeing him walk down the long ward exchanging a word or a smile here and there, every head turned towards him, every face brightening because he had come into the ward.

In the end bed a heavy-faced lad not much younger than himself watched the young doctor with the kind of dumb adorations sometime seen in the eyes of a faithful dog.

Just at the door Dr. Terence had turned and smiled at him, and the poor rough lad's face had softened into something almost beautiful.

Two young men, so different in appearance, in character, in position and yet brothers because of the understanding between them.

When Miss Graham and Gay Hamilton walked up the doctor's flagged path, he happened to be at home

## An Afternoon Ramble 33

and saw them from the window, and hastening to open the door himself, greeted them with a beaming smile.

"How do you do, Miss Graham? What can I do for you? Sounds like a shopwalker, doesn't it? You neither of you look much as if you needed my ministrations. O-Oh!"

His glance had fallen upon the little furry patient in Gay's arms.

"Please, doctor," cried the girl, before Miss Graham could speak, "can you do anything? We found him in the wood, caught in a trap, and I'm afraid he's badly hurt."

"I'm afraid he is," said the doctor gravely, "the ki——"

A gentle touch on his elbow gave him pause. Evidently Miss Graham did not wish him to say the obvious thing. Perhaps this was the girl his aunt had told him about, the girl who would not fit into her niche at the school. Two or three times a week, when the day's work was done, he would slip into Miss Lancaster's room through the french window and amuse his aunt with tales of his doings and the vagaries of his truly rural patients, and she would sometimes discuss with him various matters that worried her, though she more often than not ignored his advice and went her own way. So he had heard about Gay's advent and her refusal either to work or play or make friends.

He took the rabbit from Gay's arms and laid it on the table.

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"Well, well," he said, "we'll see what we can do. But first, we'll give him a whiff of something so that he won't feel anything."

"Oh, thank you, doctor," exclaimed Gay, gratefully, "you *are* kind," heaving a sigh of relief as in a few seconds the agonised panting ceased and the poor little creature lay still.

"There!" said the doctor, "Now he won't feel anything I do. And shur-r-e," he added to himself, "it's a terrible loiar an' chate it is that ye are, Terence, me bhoy." For Terence O'Connor was too tender-hearted to allow any animal to suffer any longer than was necessary, for the sake of a "cantankerous school-girl" or anyone else, and he had already given the dying animal its merciful release, and knew that it would never feel anything again as he began probing among the splintered bones and torn tendons. In a very few minutes a neat little bandage was in place.

"Mind you," warned the doctor, looking at Gay, "I don't say it will be any good; he's very far gone, you know. But we've done the best we can for him. I'll let you know in the morning how he is.

"Thank you so much," said his visitors together.

"We must go now," added Miss Graham. "I have left the other girls alone in the wood; they will be getting into mischief."

"Not they! laughed Dr. Terence. "The girls of Rolsham Manor School *never* got into mischief. You'll find them waiting for you in serried ranks, like the men of the *Birkenhead*. Know that story?" he added, turning to Gay.

"No," answered Gay.

"You ought to, then," said the doctor. "In the year—er—when was it, Miss Graham?"

Miss Graham laughed and shook her head.

"I'm sure I don't remember," she said.

"And you a school-marm," said the young doctor, reproachfully. "Never mind! I don't remember either, and me the proud possessor of two history prizes, and anyway, the date doesn't matter; it's a deathless story—a story for all time. The *Birkenhead* was a troopship crammed with soldiers and—er—other folks, sailors I suppose and a few wives and babies. Then—what happened, Miss Graham? Oh, I forgot—your memory is as bad as mine. Anyway, something went wrong and the great ship began to sink. And then it was discovered that there were not nearly enough boats. The officers paraded the men and they all stood to attention on deck and went down with the ship without a murmur. A fine story that; England ought to be proud of it. And I expect ivery blissed crathure ov thim was an Oireshman."

"Or a Canadian!" said Gay with a laugh.

Gay Hamilton laughing! And such a charming laugh, too. What a dear girl she would be," thought Miss Graham, as they walked down the doctor's path together, if only she would be her natural self and forget her grievances.

Just before they reached the wood again, Gay stopped and touched the young teacher's arm.

"Please, Miss Graham," she said, a little more colour than usual in her face, "I want to say thank you

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for taking so much trouble. Some people wouldn't have bothered and I—I——"

She floundered to a stop and Miss Graham laid her hand on her shoulder and smiled.

"That's all right, Gay dear," she said, "I know how you feel and what you want to say. Shall we take it as said? And shall we admit that though we are teacher and pupil, we can be good friends?"

"Y-yes, Miss Graham," was all Gay could find to say, but the mistress was satisfied.

"All right! Come along, now!" she said. "The girls will think we are lost."

But as they hurried through the wood, she said to herself: "Score to me! She'll thaw to the girls before long, and be much happier in consequence."

Meanwhile, the young doctor, after having seen his callers off, went back to his surgery and gently stroked the soft fur of his erstwhile patient.

"Poor little chap!" he murmured. "I did the best for you, you know. Nothing could have saved you."

Then he carried the still limp little body to a corner of his garden, dug a hole and buried it. When he had filled up the grave and given it a final pat with his spade, he plucked a wallflower and stuck it in the centre of the tiny mound.

Then, with a smile at his own fantastic action, he went back to the house.

"Wouldn't she think me a sentimental jackass?" he soliloquised as he put his spade away.

But he was *not* thinking of his aunt at the moment.

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The next morning the young science mistress received a note.

"DEAR MISS GRAHAM,—it ran—

"I am sure you will not be surprised to hear that the patient did *not* survive the operation. He was dead before I started to cure him. I could not let him go on suffering, now could I?—not for a hundred disagreeable school-girls. She is the cantankerous new girl, isn't she? Silly little juggins, not to be happy at Rolsham Manor. She'll learn wisdom in time. Will you break the news to her? About the bunny, I mean, not about her imminent acquisition of wisdom.

"Yours to command,

"TERENCE O'CONNOR."

One result of that afternoon's ramble in the wood was that Gay Hamilton decided that there was *one* decent person at Rolsham Manor School, anyway, and Miss Graham had no reason to complain of the new girl's slackness in *her* classes.

## CHAPTER V

### GAY INTERVENES

ONE morning in the dormitory, Mary Diana and her friends were busy discussing the coming cricket match with the second eleven of the neighbouring school of St. Mildred's and the likelihood or unlikelihood of any one of their number being included in the team selected to meet the visitors.

The first eleven at Rolsham Manor School was made up of sixth form girls with the addition of two or three from the upper fifth, and the second eleven consisted of upper fifth girls with occasional vacancies for one or two lower fifth members.

"If they don't put *you* in to play, Mary Diana," observed Rufus, "it will be a downright shame."

Mary Diana shrugged her shoulders.

"Don't suppose any of us will be," she said. "I was only stuck in last year in that match with St. Aldyth's because Vera Manners and Amy Carleton were in the san. with serious attacks."

"Yes, that was after Vera's famous birthday tuck-box," laughed Maisie.

"Anyway, that good old tuck-box did the school a good turn. If M.D. and Rufus hadn't played in that match we should probably have lost it," said Joyce.

"Pooh!" said Mary Diana, "I only had the luck to bowl their captain."

"Only!" cried Maisie. "Why, it was the turning point of the whole match. She looked as if she had taken up a permanent residence at the wicket, and after that splendid ball of yours got rid of her, the rest of the side went down like nine-pins. It upset their motto, or something."

"Upset their *what?* Motto?" cried Nora. "Whatever is she talking about?"

Mary Diana suddenly went off into a peal of laughter.

"She means *morale*," she spluttered. "Like the Germans at the end of the war, you know, when they got the wind up. I remember hearing daddy saying they had lost their *morale*, and asked him what it meant."

"Well," put in Maisie, "I don't see that I was far wrong. A motto is a thing that helps you to live up to something and have high ideas and courage and all that sort of thing, and when you get the wind up you lose all that. So there!"

"Oh, you'd argue that St. Paul's dome is a soap-bubble," laughed Mary Diana.

"Anyway," went on Maisie, "all that, as the story book writers say, is a discretion——"

"A *digression*, you mean," cried Nora, amid another peal of laughter.

Maisie waved her hands about and raised her voice.

"What I mean to say is," she declared, "that after a triumph like that of last year, after the lower fifth



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had saved the match, they leave all of us out of the second eleven."

Mary Diana laughed and patted her head.

"Keep your wool on, me dear," she said, "we don't know that we *are* all going to be left out yet."

"Not much chance," grumbled Maisie, "not with Veronica Warner as captain of the second eleven. That's a forsworn inclusion."

"*Foregone conclusion!*" laughed the girls in chorus as they trooped down to breakfast.

As a matter of fact, though Veronica Warner was captain of the second eleven she had to submit her list of names to Jane Mainwaring, the games captain and captain of the first eleven, and when the list was out, Mary Diana Allerton's name appeared on it, but she was the only lower fifth former to be included.

Rufus was disappointed, but she philosophically remarked that she supposed they must be thankful for small mercies.

"You will have to play up, M.D.," remarked Joyce, "to uphold the honour of the lower fifth."

"I expect I shall make a pair of spectacles," grinned Mary Diana. "One so often does one's worst when one particularly wants to do one's best."

"Hark to our M.D. talking like a dismal jimmy," laughed Rufus. "A most unusual proceeding."

For some time they eagerly discussed the chances of the school, until Gay, who had taken no part and had been sitting in the window trying to read, got up and walked to the door.

"You all talk as if this old match was of more

importance than anything else," she remarked in an exasperated tone as she closed the door behind her.

"A pretty Rolshamian *she* is," exclaimed Joyce. "I don't believe she cares an ounce of potato peelings whether the old school wins or loses."

And if the question had been put to Gay, she would have declared that Joyce was quite right in her surmise.

Yet both of them were wrong.

The day of the match was bright and clear and the St. Mildred's team arrived in good time and in good spirits.

Who could be dull and miserable on a glorious day in early summer when one is absolutely fit and looking forward to a trial of skill with rivals of worthy mettle? Both teams were brimful of youthful excitement and keen anticipation, as were also the partisans of both sides whose duty and pleasure it would be to look on and encourage and applaud.

The St. Mildred's captain won the toss, and Veronica Warner led her followers out to take their places in the field amid an outburst of welcoming cheers that was almost equalled a second or two later when the two batsmen put in an appearance.

But it was not long before they were both back again, gloomily removing their pads. Two wickets down for ten runs.

The Rolsham bowlers and fielders were jubilant and such was their keenness that runs came slowly, and wickets fell with such dismal regularity that all the St. Mildred's side was out for fifty-five.

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Rolsham Manor was very pleased, and the two batsmen to open their innings received a joyous welcome.

They were two of the best upper fifth girls, and made quite a good beginning, and put up a very useful twenty-five runs before being separated.

Veronica herself went in next and runs came freely, but with the score at fifty-three she lost her partner and soon after had to retire, herself, being smartly caught in the slips. Her departure was the signal for "an amazing collapse," as the newspaper reporters say on occasion, and player after player took her stand and faced the bowling, only to be dismissed in double-quick time, after making no more than a run or two each.

In due course Mary Diana's turn came to show what she could do.

"Dear old M.D. means to do or die," grinned Rufus. "Look at her chin! Give her a cheer, girls!"

The little group of chums responded promptly, and used their lungs and voices so effectively that the St. Mildred's players might have been excused for thinking that here was the champion of the second eleven.

And indeed, they might have gone on holding that opinion, for Mary Diana began hitting the bowling about in a more determined manner than any of her colleagues in the team. She had a certain amount of luck in her innings, for she took risks and more than once only escaped defeat by the narrowest of margins, but it was certainly cheerful, interesting cricket to watch and she was applauded heartily again and again.

When she had contributed twenty-seven runs she

lost her partner, and the last player came in, a steady rather than a brilliant bat, who preferred to concentrate on keeping her end up, leaving M.D. to make the runs.

The score rose to one hundred and eleven, and then Mary Diana, stepping out to a difficult ball that completely defeated her, was clean bowled.

But she had certainly done a good deal towards saving the situation, and the whole school cheered her as she walked back to the pavilion, the lower fifth making more than their fair share of noise.

"There!" exclaimed Maisie. "Where would they have been without our M.D.?"

The St. Mildred's girls played very much better in the second innings, and put together a quite respectable score, so that when Rolsham Manor went in again they required seventy-eight runs to win.

The first wicket fell at thirteen and Veronica, to her own disgust and the dismay of the school, was caught at the wicket before she had scored.

The succeeding players, however, did better, and doggedly hit up runs, and excitement and interest grew, for it became apparent that there was likely to be a very close finish.

It was then that Gay Hamilton began to experience her first cricket thrill, and she realised that she *did* care who won.

When Mary Diana went in there were seventeen runs needed for victory.

Amid the wild cheers of the school, the first ball sent down to her went skimming away to the boundary. Thirteen to win!

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The second she hit for a possible two, but realising that it had been fielded particularly smartly, decided not to risk the second run and called a sharp "No" to her partner.

The latter faced the bowling rather nervously—no "Test match player", she—and lifted the ball directly into the hands of the St. Mildred's captain. The last player came in, and the interest grew almost painful.

Each ball was waited for in tense silence—every stroke greeted with wild applause, whether it made a run or not.

Gzy watched the proceedings with shining eyes and flushed cheeks. It seemed to her that she had never wanted anything as she wanted Mary Diana to make those last six necessary runs.

A maiden over followed, the last ball so nearly bowling Mary Diana's partner that the spectators gave vent to a long-drawn gasp.

"Oh dear!" groaned Maisie. "If that off stump had had another coat of varnish, the whole thing would have been all over. The strain is appalling!"

"Hush!" whispered Joyce, "I can't listen."

Breathless silence again as Mary Diana, pale but steady and determined, stood ready, silence followed by a wild yell as wood struck leather with a sharp sound; but the ball was well fielded and the batsmen only risked running two.

The next ball was just the kind Mary Diana liked; she stepped out to it and away it went skimming towards the boundary for those four winning runs.

It was not all over yet, however, for the St. Mildred's

captain was running for it for all she was worth, determined to save that boundary if at all possible.

The spectators almost held their breath. Would she succeed or not? Yes! No! Yes!

Suddenly another figure was seen to be running like a deer, and before anybody could take in what was actually happening, Gay Hamilton had picked up the ball almost from under the fielder's fingers and flung it far out of her reach.

"Now get your runs, Mary Diana!" she shrieked, her voice almost cracking with excitement.

For a moment everybody was struck dumb, then pandemonium broke out and Gay found herself surrounded by indignant girls.

"What did you do that for?"

"You silly idiot—you've *ruined* the match."

"Well—you *have* made a muddle of things!"

On all sides irritated, disgusted remarks were poured upon Gay's devoted head.

The game had come to a standstill and nobody seemed to know what ought to be done; the umpires and captains were discussing the matter, and decided that that last ball should be ignored.

So the bowler sent Mary Diana another ball without result and then her partner stood ready, looking decidedly anxious, and nobody was surprised when her middle stump went flying.

Once more Rolshamians turned indignant faces towards Gay.

"There you are, you see! Now you have lost us the match!"

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But Gay stood up to her accusers with answering indignation.

"What are you making such a fuss about?" she demanded. "One would think I had done a monstrous thing. I only wanted to make sure of Mary Diana getting her runs."

"But it was against the rules of the game for any outsider to interfere," expostulated one very irate damsel.

"Oh, rules again!" exclaimed an exasperated Gay. "It's nothing but rules, rules, rules about everything here!"

"See here, my child," said a voice behind her, and Gay turned to see that the games captain and some of the other bigger girls had joined the group, among them, Mary Hill, the games captain of St. Mildred's School, who had accompanied her second eleven. It was she who was addressing the delinquent.

She put her hands on Gay's shoulders and smiled down at her.

"You have never seen a proper cricket match before, have you?" she asked.

"No," replied Gay, a little sullenly.

"I believe you come from Canada."

"Yes," said Gay, shortly.

"Ever been to a rodco?" was the next question.

"Yes," answered Gay again, but with a decided increase of interest.

"The men pit their strength against steers, don't they?" the older girl went on. "And each man tries to down his animal in quicker time than his rival?"

Gay nodded, wondering whither all this was tending. What had a rodeo in Canada to do with cricket in England?

"Well," said Mary Hill, "supposing somebody among the onlookers wanted his friend to win and rushed in and stabbed the beast his chum was trying to down, what do you think would happen?"

In spite of herself, Gay looked up at the big girl and a tiny smile touched her lips.

"I should think there would be a free fight," she answered, "and the man who did it might be in danger of getting lynched."

"Exactly!" commented Mary Hill. "Then surely you begin to understand why everybody was a bit upset at what you did just now?"

Gay nodded again.

"And you won't do such a thing any more?"

"No," answered Gay.

"That's all right, then," said Mary Hill, "and I think," she added, looking round at the assembled girls, "that we won't say any more about it. We'll have another match between our second-elevens before the end of the term—and that's *that!*"

So Gay's intervention in her first experience of a cricket match was more or less relegated to the background, only Veronica and a few others taking the trouble to remind her of it.

"And anyway," remarked Mary Diana, "it showed that she is beginning to care something for dear old Roisham, which is a good thing."



## CHAPTER VI

### GAY AND THE SCHOOL CAPTAIN

IN the dormitory that night there was plenty of talk, and though nobody directly mentioned her spectacular intervention in the match that afternoon, Gay knew it was at the back of everyone's mind, and took no part in the conversation, but, keeping a little apart, brushed her hair assiduously till it was as glossy as a raven's breast.

Presently lights were out and after a few giggles and stage whispers the dormitory settled down into silence.

Gay was the last to sleep, and it seemed to her that she had barely closed her eyes when there was a click, the room was flooded with light, and several dressing-gowned figures, armed with pillows, pranced in and began belabouring the recumbent girls. In a moment the latter were up and an energetic battle was quickly in progress. Veronica Warner, the leader of the invaders, had made straight for Mary Diana's bed, and the two were soon slashing at one another in fine style, with their respective pillows. The Beaton girl was holding her own well, in spite of the handicap of being taken by surprise, when suddenly Veronica put out her foot and tripped her opponent up. Mary Diana was down and at the mercy of her adversary.

## Gay and the School Captain 49

A murmur of exasperation and dismay came from her friends, but before they could go to her rescue, a brown shoe came flying through the air, aimed with great precision and hit Veronica on the angle of her brow.

That young lady let out a sharp yell and clapped her hand to her forehead, and a gasp of horror came from several of the girls when, upon removing her hand, her fingers were seen to be faintly streaked with blood.

"You little savage!" exclaimed Veronica, turning angrily on Gay, "you might have *killed* me!"

"Nonsense!" cried Rufus. "It would take more than that to kill *you*. Cat's have nine lives, you know."

"I shouldn't care if I *had*!" muttered Gay.

"What can you expect," said one of the Seaton girls, in a particularly irritating manner, "from a half-civilized Canadian?"

Then Gay lost her temper.

"How dare you?" she cried, stamping her foot. "It's you who are half-civilized. You're a horrid, mean, cheating lot, and I hate you all."

"*Miss Spitfire!*" taunted Veronica. "That is what we shall have to call her. 'Miss Spitfire from Canada!'"

Gay was white with passion, and picked up the fellow of the shoe that had already done mischief.

She stood poised in the act of throwing it at her tormentor when a voice from the door spoke quietly.

"What is all this?" it said.

Rielen Bracefield, the school captain and head of Beaton, stood there, surveying the scene.

## 50 "Miss Spitfire" at School

Gay's hand was lowered and the shoe clattered to the floor, but her chest still heaved with the stress of emotion within her.

Veronica was ostentatiously holding her hand to her forehead.

Helen turned to her.

"What is the matter, Veronica?" she asked.

"Gay Hamilton flung a shoe at me, Helen," replied the wounded heroine in an exaggeratedly feeble voice, "and my forehead is cut. I expect I shall be scarred for life."

Helen remained unmoved by the piteous picture.

"May I ask what you and the other members of Seaton are doing out of your own room at this hour?" she asked severely.

Veronica shuffled from one foot to the other and remained silent.

"Mary Diana," went on Helen, "will you be kind enough to tell me what all this is about?"

"We were all asleep," replied Mary Diana, when Seaton invaded us for a pillow fight. In the middle, Gay, not having seen a pillow fight before, got excited and threw a shoe. I'm sure she didn't mean to hit anybody——"

"I *did*," broke in Gay. "Veronica got you down by a mean trick, and I *meant* to hit her and I *did* and I'd do it again if——"

"*Miss Spitfire!*" interjected Veronica, glad that Gay was showing up badly before Helen.

But the captain turned on her sharply, looking very displeased.

## Gay and the School Captain 51

"Go back to your own dormitory, all of you," she said, waving her hand towards the Seaton girls, "and each of you bring me a hundred lines for being out of it after lights out. If there is any more of this kind of thing this term you will all be reported to Miss Lancaster."

She waited until Veronica and her fellows had filed out of the room, then closed the door.

"Now get back into bed as quickly as possible, girls," she said. "I'll wait and put the light out."

Without a word they obeyed, but Gay was still very white. She crept between the sheets and turned her head away.

Helen stood beside her a moment, and then laid her gentle, cool hand on the younger girl's lightly closed fist and stroked it until the clenched fingers slowly relaxed and twined themselves round her own.

"I'm sorry!" came in a tiny stifled whisper, and Helen, stooping low, whispered back.

"All right, dear! Come to my room to-morrow during morning break, will you? Good night!"

Gay could not answer in words, she only pressed the big girl's kind fingers.

"Mary Diana," said the captain, aloud, "you will please see that there is no retaliation on the Seaton girls for to-night's raid."

"Very well, we promise," answered Mary Diana, speaking for the others as well as herself.

"That's all right, then!" said Helen. "Good night, girls!"

"Good night, Helen!" answered the girls in chorus.

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The head girl took her departure, and once more silence fell upon the dormitory.

The next morning, at the appointed time, Gay knocked on the door of Helen's study and was bidden to enter.

The captain smiled, indicated a chair and brought out a tin of biscuits. •

She talked for a few minutes on general school subjects, then suddenly shot a question at her visitor.

"You find it a bit difficult to keep your temper, don't you?"

Gay nodded.

"So, do I," said Helen. .

Gay looked astonished. It was hardly believable of the apparently self-controlled school captain.

"It's quite true," smiled Helen. "I have mastered it better of late years, but I used to break out pretty badly occasionally. Like you, eh?"

"Yes," answered Gay.

"I am going to tell you what made me see that I must make a strong effort to control myself," said the captain, taking up a pencil and tracing the pattern on the chintz arm of her chair. "I only have one brother, six years older than myself. He is very fond of me and I of him, but at times, as boys will, he used to delight in teasing me. One day, after breakfast, he was chaffing and making fun, and I completely lost my temper, which only made him laugh the more. I absolutely lost control of myself and picking up a table knife I flung it straight at him."

Helen laid down the pencil and clasped her hands round her knees.

## Gay and the School Captain 53

"I was only nine years old at the time," she went on, in a low voice, "but I shall never forget the horror I felt when I saw my aim had been only too true. The point of the knife had struck him close to the left eye. You can imagine what I suffered, because for weeks and weeks there was a doubt whether he would ever see again, and what was my relief when at last the doctors said the threat to his sight was over. He was so good and patient all the time, and would not let me blame myself much, but it taught me a lesson I never forgot. Whenever I feel myself getting ruffled I seem to see him lying there so patiently with the bandages over his eyes, and it helps me to keep a tight hold on my temper. My dear, I know that Veronica Warner can be very trying; to be quite candid, I like her less than any girl in the school, but supposing that shoe of yours had hurt her seriously last night, would you ever have forgiven yourself?"

"No," answered Gay.

She had hardly spoken a word since coming into the room, but Helen had seen the changing expressions on the younger girl's face and knew she was not telling her tale in vain.

"So now," the captain went on cheerfully, "I believe you are going to watch your temper more carefully in future, and we will say no more about last night's little affair. Now run out and get a breath of fresh air before the bell rings."

"Yes—you mean," said Gay, "that you are not going to report me?"

"Exactly!" replied Helen. "You will hear no more

## 54 "Miss Spitfire" at School

about it, unless," she added, with a smile, "you begin flinging your shoes wildly about again."

A tiny answering smile flickered across Gay's face.

"I'll try not to do it again," she said quietly.

"That's right!" said Helen. "Now push off!"

"Thank you very much," said Gay, her eyes more eloquent than her tongue, and slipped out, closing the door softly behind her.

She had found, in the captain, another person at Rolsham Manor, whom, in spite of herself, she could not help respecting.

## CHAPTER VII

### VERONICA V. GAY

GAY had meant it when she promised to try and control her temper better, but she found it very difficult, for Veronica Warner set herself to be as aggravating as she could be, trying her best to goad the other girl into an exhibition of passionate anger and stinging retorts.

Mary Diana and the other inmates of the dormitory objected strongly to Veronica's tactics and stood up for Gay manfully. After all, she was a Beatonite and a member of the lower fifth, and they could do no less; but their partisanship helped her considerably and made her feel that she must relax the attitude of hostility to everyone with which she had begun the term.

Dan Burfield, Miss Graham, the young doctor, Helen Bracefield, Mary Diana and her friends—quite a lot of people in England, after all, who were not so impossibly impossible as she had imagined.

Besides, a girl not yet fifteen years old was likely to find it difficult to live for any length of time entirely aloof from her immediate companions, especially companions who were on their part so inclined to be friendly.

One night, in the dormitory, somebody began talking about travelling abroad, though, as yet, only two or



## 56 "Miss Spitfire", at School

three of them had had any opportunity of sampling such joys. One and another spoke of some part of the world she wished to see, and suddenly Gay began to talk of Canada, and for the first time became the central figure in the group of girls.

She knew and loved her subject and talked well, so that soon she had her companions listening intently. She made them see the wide stretches of country, the comfortable one-story verandah-surrounded house that had been her home, the veil of delicate green that covered the miles of brown earth when the wheat appeared above ground, the glory of the ripe, rippling gold when the harvest time drew near; the wild rides after the cattle, the picturesque garb of some of the people; the ice-bound winter, with the skating and skiing, the games in the deep snow, the sleigh-riding and tobogganing when the lie of the land was suitable.

"Well," sighed Rufus, when Gay stopped with a jerk, realising that she was holding the floor as she had not done before, "it must be exciting. No wonder you found school dull after all that."

They had all been so engrossed in the story that they had forgotten to go on with their preparations for bed, and when Miss Graham came in on her rounds of the dormitories to see that all was well, she found all six girls in various stages of undress, but not one of them in bed.

"What is the meaning of this, girls?" she exclaimed, trying to look very severe.

"Oh, Miss Graham," cried Mary Diana, "we are so sorry, but Gay was telling us about her life in Canada,

and it was so absolutely absorbing and thrilling that we forgot everything else."

Gay forgetting her grievances and laying herself out to entertain the others! What a miracle!

The young mistress turned and looked at her, and her own face relaxed in a kind smile.

"It is always interesting to hear about other countries from people who have actually lived in them," she said, "and I expect you all thoroughly enjoyed what Gay had to say, but it is getting late now, and you must all hurry up and get into bed, I will come round again presently."

"Thank you, Miss Graham," called the girls.

"What a good thing it was Dolly Dimples," remarked Maisie, "and not one of the other teachers; we might all have been landed with lines."

"Tell us some more about Canada some day, won't you, Gay?" said Rufus.

Gay nodded her head.

"Perhaps!" she said.

After that night she was no longer left so much outside the circle as she had been, and Rufus was once heard to remark that "the Canadian wasn't such a dud, after all."

"I told you I rather liked her from the beginning," said Mary Diana.

One afternoon, Gay wandered down to the playing fields. For a while she watched the girls at cricket practice, then the crowd gathered round the tennis courts attracted her attention and she strolled off there.

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A vigorous game was in progress; for the games captain was keenly on the alert comparing the prowess of the various players, in view of the fact that a tournament with the neighbouring school of Furneaux Shields was in prospect.

Veronica and her special chum, Adeline Bathurst, were playing two other girls of the upper fifth. The latter did not lack pluck and spirit and fought hard, but the superior skill of Veronica and her partner wore them down, and though they succeeded in wresting a couple of games from their stronger opponents, they lost the set.

Mary Diana, her face flushed with bowling in the hot sun, came running up to join Gay just as the game finished.

"Gay," she said, "wouldn't you like to come down to the nets and make a beginning at cricket. I'm sure you'd take to it easily. I'll lend you my bat."

Gay hesitated, and at that moment Veronica's penetrating, rather high-pitched voice, broke in.

"Wouldn't the dear little savage rather have a game of tennis?"

For a moment Gay looked steadily into the other girl's mocking eyes, then a sudden gleam came into her own.

"I will play you a single," she said, quietly.

Veronica threw back her head and gave vent to shrill derisive laughter.

It was meant to rouse Gay, but this time it did not succeed.

"Will somebody lend me a racket?" asked the

younger girl, taking no notice of the way in which Veronica had received her challenge.

"Here you are! Have mine!" cried Rufus, thrusting a racket into her hand.

"I believe the simpleton really means it," laughed Veronica.

"I certainly do," said Gay.

"Oh, well, come along then," sneered Veronica, "I've got ten minutes to spare."

Mary Diana, looking a little anxious, caught Gay's arm.

"Are you sure you want to play, Gay?" she asked.

She evidently expected there was going to be a kind of slaughter of the innocent, and did not want Gay to have the mortification of being wiped out, as it were, by the fifth form champion.

But Gay turned to her with an unusually vivid smile.

"It's all right, M.D.," she said, "I've made up my mind to play."

It was the first time she had called Mary Diana by the initials used by Rufus, and the others, and Mary Diana gave her an affectionate pat on the shoulder, accompanied by her own sunniest smile.

"All right, old girl," she said. "Good luck to you and three cheers for the lower fifth."

Gay followed Veronica on to the court and took up her position, and before very long the onlookers began to realise that such a game was being fought as had not been seen on the Rolsham Manor playing fields for many a long day.

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Veronica smiled at first, for she won the first game rather easily. •

Gay had not handled a racket since leaving the ranch, and the thought that the last time she had played it had been against the father she had so loved affected her, but presently the joy of the game itself and the intense desire to defeat this opponent came to her rescue, and Veronica, to her disgusted surprise, found herself forced to put forth her very best efforts.

She was no mean antagonist, and was just as keen to prevent Gay defeating her as Gay was to attain that object, and the fifth form, upper and lower, gathered round to look on, as well as some of the sixth form girls, who realised that something worth witnessing was going on, and soon, almost the whole school was there, applauding and cheering first one girl, then the other.

The lower fifth girls were particularly thrilled, especially Mary Diana and her chums. To think that they had had the heroine of the match in their midst all these weeks and never known it.

Veronica was bigger and stronger than Gay, but the latter was light and quick, and her father had taught her to use her brains, and for hours had made her practise placing the ball just where she wished, so that again and again Veronica was completely baffled, and left standing helpless. Still, she was game, and fought on doggedly, and when the game stood at four—two against her, succeeded in winning two consecutive games to equalise.

But she had shot her bolt; Gay took the next with her service without losing a point, and won the next—and the set—with the loss of only one point.

Veronica looked at Gay with a new, reluctant respect in her eyes.

"You play well," she said grudgingly, and walked off towards the school.

Gay was surrounded the next moment with eager, laughing girls, congratulating her, appreciating her various strokes, expressing their pride in her.

"Hooray for the lower fifth!" cried Rufus, prancing round and waving her arms about wildly. "What price *now* their chance of the championship of the glorious fifth!"

"Why," exclaimed Mary Diana, "I believe she could beat Jane Mainwaring herself. Wouldn't it be magnificent if a lower fifth former and a member of our dorm. carried off the *school* championship. Fancy having the Woodman Cup in our class-room."

"Who knows?" said a laughing voice behind her, and there stood Jane Mainwaring, the popular games captain herself.

"Bravo, kid!" she added, turning to Gay. "You are certainly an acquisition to our team. I saw you could *run*," she went on, with a broadening smile, "the day you poked your nose into the cricket match with St. Mildred's. Do you play that, too? Cricket, I mean!"

"No" answered Gay. "I never had the chance."

"Well, you have the chance now," said Jane, nodding her head vigorously, "and the sooner you begin the

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better. You ought to do well; you are just built for games. Can't think why on earth you have been here all these weeks and kept out of everything the way you have. Waste of good material, I call it."

Gay looked a little uncomfortable, and did not reply. She felt she could not tell this big, breezy girl that pride, and pride alone, had kept her from entering fully into the life of the school.

"Come down to the nets now," proceeded Jane. "Nothing like striking while the iron's hot. I'll put you through your paces. Don't even know anything about how to hold a bat I suppose?"

"I've watched some of the other girls," ventured Gay.

"Humph!" commented Jane. "Depends on *which* girls you watched."

Arrived at the nets Jane Mainwaring proceeded to give the younger girl a drilling. Gay was under the impression that she was doing nothing but make a hopeless exhibition of herself, and expected any minute to be told that she was no good and might as well give up the idea of being a cricketer, but just when she was beginning to feel utterly despairing, the games captain stopped bowling, put on her blazer, and with her hands in her pockets, approached Gay and smiled.

"You'll do," she said. "One of these days you'll be a credit to the school, but you'll have to *practise*, my child, and I'll see that you do."

## CHAPTER VIII

DAVID HAMILTON

ROUND the side of the cottage, down the flagged path, out through the gate he came at a mad gallop, a lively young black spaniel, all great floppy paws and ears, and constantly wildly wagging tail—every movement entirely supple and effortless; just the essence of joyous, irresponsible young life.

Up the path again, then down and out of the gate, chasing a morsel of fluttering paper up the road, back again with still more headlong speed as Dan Burfield came out of the gate wheeling his bicycle.

The boy flung his leg over the saddle and stood with one foot on the ground while the excited young creature pranced round him with joyous barks.

“Down, Don, down, sir!” cried his master. “Go home at once! You know you can’t come along of me when I am goin’ to work. Go home, d’ye hear? Go home!”

But Don was young and had not yet learned to obey, and thought it was all part of a game. He dashed up and down, and raced round and round, while his young master called to him in vain.

Suddenly there was the throbbing sound of a motorcycle. The rider came round the corner at a fair but not extreme speed; he saw the puppy and swerved,



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but the next moment there was a yelp and Don was rolling over and over in the dusty road.

Dan dropped his bicycle with a clatter and rushing forward, gathered his pet up into his arms, where Don lay looking up at him with pathetic eyes and whimpering almost like a hurt child trying to tell his troubles. It almost seemed as though he were saying: "I was only playing in the road as happy as a young dog can be, and a great horrid noisy thing came rushing at me and frightened and hurt me. I *do* feel so bad, master dear."

Meanwhile, the motor-cyclist, regardless of danger to himself, had steered into the hedge as the quickest way of stopping, and leaping out of his saddle came running back. Dan looked at him as he came up.

"You *beast!*" he said fiercely. "You idiot, you." He found himself looking into a pair of dark blue eyes full of concern.

"I know," said their owner. "I expect you hate me like the dickens. I'm frightfully sorry—— I did try to avoid him. Put him down, will you, and let's see how much he is hurt."

Dan's face had softened, and without a word he laid the puppy down in the road and the other lad knelt down in the dust and felt for broken bones.

Don's mouth was bleeding, but he licked the gentle brown fingers that were examining his wounds.

"No bones broken, I am thankful to say," was the verdict, "and that cut on his mouth is only slight and will soon heal up. This paw is the worst, but I'll soon make that more comfortable."

The speaker stood up. He was a tall lad about seventeen, wearing a school cap that Dan knew meant he came from Radston School about five miles away.

He produced a spotlessly clean handkerchief, which, with the help of his penknife, he tore into strips.

"Good thing for once it happens to be a clean one," he grinned. "I'm afraid I use mine for all sorts of things. Can you get me any water?"

Dan nodded, hurried up to the cottage, and came back carrying a basin of water.

Carefully the schoolboy bathed the wounded limb and bound it up.

"There!" he said, at last, rising to his feet. "Where's his kennel?"

"At the back of the cottage," replied Dan. "I'll take him and put him in."

But as he stooped to put his intention into action, the puppy got to his feet and, holding up the bandaged paw, stood wagging his tail vigorously.

Both boys laughed.

"Not much wrong with a puppy who wags his tail like that," remarked the cause of the accident. "He'll soon be all right again. My name is David Hamilton. I'll call round in a day or two and see how he is."

"Thank you," replied Dan. "An'—an' I'm sorry I called you names an'——"

"Oh, that's all right," laughed David. "I'd have done the same in your place. I wonder you didn't punch my head. I hate dumb animals to be hurt. I must be off now. On my way to see about a new cricket bat. Old Maths wanted some books called for,

## 66 "Miss Spitfire" at School

so lent me his motor-bike, but must be back in time for afternoon school."

"I must go too," said Dan. "Old Bates'll give me a bit o' tongue for being late."

"Where do you work?" asked David.

"At Rolsham Manor School. I'm garden boy there."

"Oh! Rolsham Manor School!" said David. "A cousin of mine is there, I think, Gay Hamilton by name—never seen her—a bit of a corker by all accounts."

"New this term, ain't she?" said Dan. "Says she hates England."

"Hates England, does she?" laughed David. "She *must* be a rum un. She'll get over that in time. Shake hands, will you? Just to show there is no ill-will about this chap," touching the puppy's head.

Dan grinned, and his grimy, toil-worn hand met the other strong brown one in a firm grip.

"That's all right," said David, showing his white teeth in a gay smile. "Now we're friends, and the puppy has forgiven me, too, I think. Cheerio!"

With another smile and wave of the hand, he returned to his motor-cycle, and was soon speeding away.

"Come here, Don," said Dan, and gathering the puppy up, carried him to his kennel.

"He pretty near did for yer, old chap," he muttered, "but he's a decent sort of a cove, anyway."

Then he, too, mounted his iron steed and sped away to Rolsham Manor.

## CHAPTER IX

### GAY TAKES HER OWN WAY

"OH be joyful, girls, and hurry up and get ready."

Rufus had come dancing up to a group of her friends, fairly brimming over with excited anticipation.

"Get ready for what?" asked Mary Diana, with a stifled yawn.

"For a swim in the sea. Denvie and Dolly Dimples are going to take us."

"Hooray!" cried Mary Diana, springing up, all her yawning lassitude vanished. "It's just the day for the sea, so jolly hot. Do you swim, Gay?"

"Yes," answered Gay, "but I haven't done any since I came to England."

"Neither have we since last summer," put in Maisie. "If this warm weather lasts we shall probably be allowed to go into the open air bath every day. That's great fun, but nothing like the dear old sea, of course."

"No, there's nothing like the sea," agreed Mary Diana, "but we don't often go because, at times, it is rather dangerous here, the undertow, you know."

"What's the undertow?" asked Gay.

"Oh, a kind of undercurrent," answered Mary Diana, carelessly, rooting among her belongings for her bathing dress.

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The girls were soon ready and joined the two teachers in the hall, and the whole party set forth full of high spirits. Even Miss Denver seemed affected by the beauty of the summer day and was "quite lively for her," as the girls whispered to one another. About twenty minutes after leaving the school they came in sight of the sea, and soon were scrambling down a rough cliff path to the sandy beach.

"Where are the bathing machines?" asked Gay. "I thought English people always bathed from funny little wooden houses."

"They do, in lots of places," answered Joyce, to whom she had addressed the remark, "but hardly anybody but us comes to this particular little cove, and if you look you will see that there are quite a number of little caves that make splendid dressing rooms."

Miss Denver had been talking to an old fisherman on the top of the cliff, but now she came down the path and approached the girls, calling them together.

"I am very sorry," she said, "but I am afraid there will be no swim this time. Old George says the undertow is very strong to-day and it will be wiser not to trust it."

"Oh, Miss Denver! What a shame!"

"Can't we go in just a little way?"

"It really isn't rough."

But Miss Denver shook her head at all the pleading.

"Better not!" she said. "Come along, we'll go for a walk along the sands to the next bay, climb the cliff by the Point and go home across country."

## Gay takes her own Way 69

Amid some grumbling the party set off, led by Miss Denver, but spirits were decidedly dampened.

Gay was bitterly disappointed. The sea looked so blue and so inviting, it seemed absurd to connect it with danger. Besides, Miss Denver had not actually forbidden them to go into the sea.

The other girls, in spite of incipient grumbles, had acquiesced in the decision and had not wandered far along the beach before they were laughing and talking together as usual; they did not suffer long from depressed spirits. But Gay lagged behind.

What nonsense it was—always these silly restrictions. Often when she and her father had journeyed from the ranch for a stay by the sea, she had bathed when the waves were three times as big and powerful as these; she was a good swimmer, she only wanted a dip, she wouldn't go far out—what possible danger could there be?

Perhaps if it had been Miss Graham who had made the request that the girls should not bathe, Gay might have repressed the rebellious feelings in her heart, but there was not much love lost between herself and Miss Denver.

Gradually she dropped still further behind, and then slipped into one of the little caves. With luck, she might be able to get a few minutes' swim and catch the rest of the party up in the next little bay without anyone being any the wiser.

She undressed quickly, got into her bathing dress and ran out on to the warm sand. A quick glance showed her that the rest of the party were just

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rounding the point and in a moment would be out of sight.

As it happened, at that moment Mary Diana, who had been engrossed in an animated argument concerning the merits or demerits of the chewing gum habit, missed Gay, and having ascertained that she was not in front, looked back.

To her dismay she saw the naughty girl race across the sand, plunge into the sea and strike out in fine style.

"Oh—Gay's—in the sea," she cried out aloud.

Miss Denver was far ahead, but Dolly Dimples was within earshot and turned instantly at Mary Diana's cry.

At once she started running back, several of the girls with her, and in a few moments they were opposite the spot where the dark head was bobbing about.

"Gay, Gay," called the anxious mistress. "come back at once!"

Gay turned and revealed a face that showed very plainly what a joy the swim had been, waved an arm to say everything was all right—and began to swim back to the shore.

But was it all right?

She was not very far out and in the ordinary way ought to have been safely back on the sandy beach inside a few minutes; but she soon realised that she was making no progress at all. She exerted herself a little more, but her efforts brought her no nearer her goal, and with a deadly sinking of her heart she knew that there was a strange force dragging her back which

## Gay takes her own Way 71

made nothing of her most powerful efforts. It began to dawn on her that she was in real danger of drowning, that her strength would give out and her body be carried away under the very eyes of the horror-stricken group on the beach.

Already they could see that the swimmer's efforts were growing more feeble, and Miss Graham felt she must act.

Flinging off the light coat she wore, the anxious mistress, just as she was, ran into the sea.

The next moment a pair of strong arms had seized her and dumped her on her feet back on the beach.

"You stay *put*!" ordered the young doctor's voice. "Do you want *two* of you to be drowned? This is a *man's* job."

He had kicked off his shoes and flung off his coat, and, in his turn, plunged into the sea.

"Don't struggle," he had called to Gay. "Try just to *keep* still and float."

In a very short time he had reached the girl. She was very white and rather exhausted-looking, but still quite conscious.

"Whatever you do, don't grab me," said Dr. Terence. "Do exactly what I tell you."

Gay was past speaking, but he knew that she had not lost her head and would obey, so he went close and in a moment the struggle back began.

And a deadly struggle it was.

Dr. Terence was young and strong and absolutely fit; but even he began to wonder whether he and the girl would ever get back.



## 72 "Miss Spitfire" at School

The terrible undertow seemed more determined than ever not to be robbed of its prey, but the young doctor brought all the strength of his will as well as of his muscles to the struggle, and slowly but surely his efforts began to tell.

Miss Denver and the rest of the girls had also come hurrying back along the beach, and the two mistresses, holding the hands of the girls who made a sort of human double chain, waded out till they were waist deep in the water and gave their aid to the almost exhausted man and girl.

Strong as he was, the young man lay on the beach utterly unable to move, incapable even of the effort to attend to Gay who was lying white and motionless near him.

In a little while he was able to direct the work of the others who had already begun to use artificial respiration on the half-drowned girl, and, to everybody's relief, she soon responded, and after a while was able to walk back to Rolsham Manor.

She was taken straight to the school hospital and told she must stay in bed until it was certain there were no ill-effects.

Deep in her heart she was sorry for her disobedience; she knew she had endangered not only her own life but that of the young doctor as well. She wanted to tell him she was sorry, she wanted to tell Dolly Dimples she was sorry; she even felt she could apologise to Miss Lancaster for all the worry and upset she had caused; but, unfortunately, the first person who came to see her was Miss Denver.

## Gay takes her own Way 73

That downright lady proceeded to give the girl what she afterwards described to her colleagues in the teachers' common room as "a jolly good talking to," with the result that Gay's rebellious feelings came uppermost once more, and when Miss Lancaster later appeared upon the scene, she sighed to find the old sullen unresponsiveness in full force again, a state of things that was only partially dispelled by the advent of the young science mistress still later.

A few mornings later, however, Gay knocked at Miss Lancaster's door and was bidden enter.

"Well, Gay," said the headmistress, "are you feeling all right again?"

"Yes, thank you, madame," replied Gay sedately.

"That's good!" said the mistress. "What did you want to see me about?"

"I wanted to know," said Gay, "if you would give me leave to go down to the village."

"It depends upon why you want to go," replied Miss Lancaster. "I do not care about any of the girls going out alone."

"I want to see Dr. O'Connor," said Gay. "I would have been drowned if he hadn't come to help me, and I want to thank him for saving my life."

It was on the tip of Miss Lancaster's tongue to remark that it was gratifying to find that it had occurred to the young lady that any expression of gratitude was necessary. The headmistress genuinely wanted to understand the difficult girl from over the seas, but the life of the nephew she so dearly loved had been endangered by the said girl's headstrong wilfulness, and

## 74 "Miss Spitfire" at School

she could not help feeling her patience a little strained. She would have enjoyed doing what Miss Denver had done, but was wise enough to realise that it would only have the effect of hardening Gay. In time she might be led, but she could not be driven.

So the lady refrained from making any caustic remarks and gave Gay permission to go and see the doctor, provided she promised to go straight there and back.

After lunch, most of the girls repaired to the playing fields, but Gay went upstairs for her outdoor garments and hurried away on her errand.

"Hello!" said the doctor when he saw her. "None the worse, are you?"

"No," replied Gay, seriously. "I am quite well, thank you. I just wanted to come and thank you for coming into the sea and saving my life the other day."

The doctor motioned her to a chair and stood before her with his hands in his pockets.

"Humph!" he said, after gazing steadily at her a few moments. "I suppose I *did* save your life, seeing that you would certainly have been drowned if someone or other hadn't turned up in the nick of time. But I'm wondering whether, after all, it was worth while. A girl who can cause so much bother through sheer disobedience is hardly much use in the world, is she? Do you know that if I had not been out to see old Betty Jones at Beach Cottage that afternoon, if I had not decided to walk back along the sands instead of inland across the fields; both you and Miss Graham would assuredly not have been alive to-day?"

## Gay takes her own Way 75

"What do you mean?" asked Gay.

The interview was not turning out as she had expected. Though she would not have admitted it to anybody but herself, she *had* thought that she might have received a word or two of commendation for the way she had behaved in a time of dire peril; she knew she had kept her head better than most girls would have done under like circumstances. And here was the young doctor glaring at her and speaking in a most severe tone of voice. She was not quite so sure that she liked him as much as she thought she did at their first meeting.

"What do I mean?" went on the doctor. "I mean that I was only just in time to prevent Miss Graham from going in after you. What chance do you think she would have had of getting back? A girl—for she is little more—worth a hundred disagreeable young misses like you. I don't understand anybody with a mentality like yours at all. Sent to a fine school like Rolsham Manor, my aunt and all those other fine, self-sacrificing women, to say nothing of those jolly girls all trying to make you happy, and you do nothing but sulk and go about with a face like a fiddle. Look how it worries your uncle, too, because you won't make up your mind to make the best of things."

"If you mean Professor Hamilton," put in ~~Gay~~ as Dr. Terence stopped for breath, "I don't care whether he is worried or not. He's horrid and I hate him."

"That will do, thank you," said the doctor, looking as though he would like to shake her. "Professor Hamilton is one of my best friends. I fagged for him

## 76 "Miss Spitfire" at School

at Harcheston, and I tell you he was one of the finest, brainiest chaps that ever was at the school. The prizes he took—well—they would have surprised you."

"Oh, I expect he's clever enough," sniffed Gay, "but that does not make me hate him any the less."

"You'd better not talk about him at all," said the doctor, "or I shall be forgetting you are a girl and pitch into you as I used to pitch into some of those worms in the fourth who used to hint it was more honourable to *lag* for a man who could kick a football half a mile or bang a cricket ball clean over the great hall than for the cleverest, most splendid chap in the school."

"Then some of the boys didn't admire him as much as *you* did," remarked Gay.

"Only the useless loafers," replied the doctor, sweetly; "those who were no good to themselves or the old school. You take my advice, young lady, and try to make yourself more popular at Rolsham Manor. You can be quite passable if you try, I'm sure. You are not a brainless idiot, though you pretend to be; you are not such a bad looker, either, though personally I don't much care for black hair and——"

Gay had been growing more and more resentful. How dared he imply that she was a useless loafer?

"I suppose you prefer *red* hair," she broke in a bit hotly, glancing up at his own glossy mahogany-coloured poll.

"*Not red!*" answered the young doctor, his voice taking on a much gentler cadence, his eyes gazing over

## Gay takes her own Way 77

Gay's head out of the window, as if he were looking at something that pleased him. "No, not red," he went on softly, "but lovely warm golden brown like the sun shining through beech trees in the autumn woods. And a pair of grey eyes like twin pools, sometimes deep with feeling, sometimes full of sparkles of laughter, sometimes—— Here, you'd better do a bunk, I'm busy, and you ought to be back at school."

He had suddenly realised Gay's presence, and that she was listening open-eyed and open-eared to his rhapsodies.

"Good-bye!" he went on. "Sorry I saved your life. I mean sorry you thought it necessary to say anything about it. Come again some day! Good-bye! good-bye!"

Gay found herself hustled out of the room and as she hurried down the flagged path she wondered why she had such a vivid mental picture of Dorothy Graham, the young science mistress. The impression vanished almost immediately, and Gay walked along the road toward Rolsham Manor rather soberly.

She had been inclined to resent the doctor's very plain speaking, but as she thought over what he had said, she could not help but see that there was a good deal of reason in it.

Except Veronica Warner and some of her special friends, most people at Rolsham Manor had been willing to be friendly and make her feel at home, and it was her own fault that she had been left so much to herself. That much she admitted.

## 78 "Miss Spitfire" at School

But when it came to the doctor's opinion of Professor Hamilton she felt that she could not follow him. It might be unreasonable, but she did not like her uncle, and nothing would make her forgive his high-handed arranging of her life without consulting her wishes at all. So she told herself, anyway.

## CHAPTER X

### VERONICA'S CHALLENGE

It had been a pouring wet day. Games and other out door occupations had been out of the question, but after tea the downpour ceased and the sun broke through great rents in the heavy clouds.

"It's clearing up at last," cried Rufus. "Let's ask if we can run out for a breath of fresh air. Who's game?"

"I!"

"And I!"

"And I!"

Several voices answered eagerly.

"Righto!" sang out Rufus, and skipped away to obtain the required permission.

She was back in a few moments.

"All right!" she cried. "We can go if we put on thick shoes and mackintoshes."

"I've got an idea," said Nora.

"*Never!*" laughed her friends. "Wonders will never cease."

Nora Baynton was the quietest of this particular group of friends, and was generally content to follow where the others—especially Mary Diana—led, but it was readily admitted that when she did make any proposal it was almost always worth making.



## 80 "Miss Spitfire", at School

So now they gathered round to hear what she had to say.

"Come close," she whispered, "we don't want anybody else to hear. It's Dolly's birthday next week. Why shouldn't we walk down to the village and see if we can find anything we could give her."

Her hearers looked at her with admiration.

"What a truly *spiffing* idea!" said Rufus.

"And it gives us an object for our walk, too," added Mary Diana, "which is a good thing."

"Rather," agreed the others. "Come along, let's get off."

They raced upstairs to don hats and coats and the necessary thick shoes, and at the top of the stairs ran into Veronica Warner and her friend Adeline Bathurst.

"Hello!" cried the former's high-pitched voice. "Where are you kids off to in such a hurry?"

"Kids!" remonstrated several indignant voices.

"Can't we go for a walk without you interfering?" added Maisie.

"A walk?" returned Veronica. "What a good idea! Addie and I will come with you."

"Wait till you're asked!" advised Joyce.

"You haven't got permission—we *have*," added Rufus.

"That's soon remedied," replied Veronica, coolly. "If you can get leave, *we* can. Come on, Addie, let's go and interview the powers that be."

The two friends ran lightly downstairs and the others hurried on their way.

## Veronica's Challenge 81

"Be as quick as you can," gasped Rufus, "and let's get out before they see which way we go."

In a few minutes, six girls slipped out of Number Four Dormitory and scuttled down the stairs, Rufus descending by way of the banisters, and breathed deeply as they found themselves in the soft fresh air after being cooped up all day. Rufus glanced back and reported that there was no sign of Veronica and her friend.

"Hooray! We've thrown them off all right," laughed Mary Diana, "I was afraid we had been a bit long over getting our money together for the birthday present."

"So was I," said Maisie, "but it's all right. Teach those two to come poking their noses into our affairs."

They were so pleased with themselves that it was rather more than disconcerting, when they reached the gate, to find Veronica and Adeline calmly waiting for them.

"There you are, children," said the former, with a somewhat malicious grin. "Now, which way shall we go?"

"Not the same way as you two!" said Mary Diana decidedly.

"What are you doing here at all?" demanded Gay. "I don't believe you have asked leave at all."

"Oh yes, we have, Miss Spitfire," answered Veronica. "We met Miss Denver on the stairs and asked her. Something new, isn't it, Addie, to have our Canadian savage being concerned for fear anyone should take french leave."

"Oh bother you, Veronica," cried Mary Diana. "Why can't you see you're not wanted?"

## 82 "Miss Spitfire" at School

"I *do* see," drawled Veronica. "That's why I'm coming. I'm pretty certain you kids are up to some mischief."

"We're *not*!" cried Rufus, exasperatedly.

"Oh, come along, girls," exclaimed Mary Diana. "We are wasting all our time. Let Veronica and Addie tag after us if it gives them any pleasure."

She turned and led the way in the opposite direction from the village, and her friends knew that the shopping expedition was "off," for that afternoon, anyway.

The whole party trailed along the high road, but there was none of the exuberance of spirits that generally characterised any undertaking of Mary Diana and Co. About a quarter of a mile along the main road, they turned off into a narrower road, little more than a lane, that ran between high hedges. A little further on the hedges gave way to woods and presently they came to a very dilapidated spile fence. There were great gaps in it, in some places whole armfuls had apparently been carried away for firewood.

Once there had been an imposing entrance, but one iron gate had fallen from its place altogether, and the other hung precariously by one rusty hinge.

Weeds and rank growth almost obliterated the once well-gravelled carriage drive, and across it lay a great fir tree that had been blown down in some wild gale of long ago. Between the trees the girls caught a glimpse of a long, low, wide-eaved house that had once been white but was now all sorts of colours. The rain-water guttering had broken away in places and the water had made long green and yellow and brown

## Veronica's Challenge 83

streaks down the walls. Nearly every pane of glass in the place was broken and the once green shutters had faded to nondescript tones and hung at all sorts of angles.

Even a child would have recognised that the house had been unoccupied for many a long day.

"The poor old place looks more and more dilapidated every time we pass," remarked Maisie.

"Why is it left like that?" asked Gay. "Who owns it?"

"That's the trouble," was the reply. "Two branches of the family—Kent, I think the name is—both claim it. A lawsuit went on for years and enough money has been spent on lawyers as would have bought the place over and over. For all I know, it may be going on still. Anyway, for years it has been empty and deserted and falling to pieces; soon it will be a hopeless ruin."

"Let's go in and have a closer view of it," suggested Joyce.

The girls had been standing in a group gazing through a great gap in the palings, but with one accord they made a move towards the ruined gateway and proceeded up the neglected drive.

The nearer they approached the deserted house the more apparent became the desolation.

"It must have been a jolly house once," mused Mary Diana.

"Yes," said Gay, "and could be again if somebody would spend some money on it. The walls are quite solid still."

## 84 "Miss Spitfire" at School

"Ugh!" said Nora. "It gives me the creeps. Let's get out in the road again."

"If you feel like that in broad daylight," sneered Veronica, "what would you do if you had to come here in the middle of the night?"

"I wouldn't," said Rufus, with a decided shake of her head.

"Why not?" demanded Gay.

"Because the place is supposed to be haunted. None of the villagers will come near it after dark."

"What nonsense!" muttered Gay.

"You wouldn't say it was nonsense if you were to see the ghost," declared Veronica.

"Is it a 'he' or a 'she'?" laughed Mary Diana. "What is it like? Does it carry its head under its arm?"

"I don't know and don't care," replied Veronica. "I only know that there have been flickering lights seen about the place and a tall figure in white appears and vanishes."

"How do you know?" demanded several voices.

"That's my business," answered Veronica.

She had no intention of owning that she had gained her information through Jessie, one of the dormitory maids, for the girls were not supposed to hinder the maids in their work by holding them in conversation.

"It doesn't much matter anyway," said Gay. "It's all a lot of nonsense. I don't believe in ghosts."

"Neither do I," snapped Veronica. "But you wouldn't care to walk round this old house at midnight, I know."

## Veronica's Challenge 85

"I wouldn't mind at all," said Gay, her chin well in the air.

"Then I dare you to do it," exclaimed Veronica, "at next full moon, when the ghost is supposed to walk."

"Done!" cried Gay.

"Oh, rubbish!" interposed Mary Diana. "Come along! We had better be getting back to school, or we shall have to face old Denvie in a temper, which would be worse than any old ghost."

She slipped her hand through Gay's arm and determinedly led the way out of the neglected garden and equally determinedly turned the conversation to the safe topic of cricket.

In a short time they were back at school and Mary Diana hoped that Gay would forget all about Veronica's silly challenge. She knew quite well that the older girl was only trying to get Gay into trouble by urging her to break one of the strictest rules at Rolsham Manor, leaving the school after dark without permission, and made up her mind to prevent it if possible.

## CHAPTER XI

### GAY HAMILTON—BOWLER

HAVING given way in the matter of joining in games, Gay began to take quite an active part in them. Nearly every day, she played tennis with somebody or other, but she never played against Veronica again. That young lady utterly refused to meet her. Not that Gay minded; she thoroughly enjoyed the games with her own room-mates and, naturally, found herself getting more and more one with them. You cannot very well play games with people and keep them at arm's length at other times.

The games captain was giving her special attention too, in the matter of cricket, and every day put her through a short period of practice at the nets.

"You're getting on well," said the big girl one day, when Gay had had a special drilling. "One of these days you are going to be one of the best bats in the school. Here," she added, handing Gay the ball she had been lightly throwing from one hand to the other, "see what you shape like at bowling."

Gay obediently took the ball and tripped away to her proper position, while Jane Mainwaring herself took her place at the wicket.

Then the games captain got the surprise of her life, for Gay sent down a ball that completely defeated her and shattered her wicket.

For a moment or two Jane stared at Gay as if she were some kind of freak.

"Was that a fluke, my child?" she demanded at last. "If not—why on earth haven't you told us you could bowl like that?"

"Is it good?" asked Gay.

"Good!" exclaimed Jane. "Look at that!" pointing to the wicket. "Who taught you? I thought you said you had never played cricket."

"I never had," replied Gay. "I had never seen it played till I came here."

"Is it a natural gift, then?" asked Jane.

"Not exactly," answered Gay. "You see, I had no young people to play with in Canada, and I often had to amuse myself when Daddy was out."

She paused, for she realised that she had spoken of her father quite calmly, and it gave her somewhat of a shock. She was not old enough to know that time softens almost any sorrow.

"Go on!" commanded Jane.

"Well," Gay went on, "one day he came home and found me throwing a tennis ball at a stick I had stuck up on the lawn. 'Here,' he said, 'I'll show you how to do that.' He showed me how to hold the ball and how to use my arm and body. But after a few minutes he said: 'This ball is no good for this kind of thing; you must have a hard ball.' About a week later a hard leather ball arrived and Daddy measured off the



## 88 "Miss Spitfire" at School

proper length and made me practise until I could make the ball do almost anything I liked. He never mentioned the word cricket to me, and I did not realise he had taught me bowling until I came here and watched you and some of the others."

She stopped, a little breathless, for it was one of the longest speeches she had made since coming to school.

"But why didn't you tell me?" asked the games captain.

"Oh—I don't know," replied Gay, looking a little uncomfortable again, for she was beginning to realise how very silly her attitude towards games at the commencement of the term had been.

"Well, anyway," said Jane, "you are not going to hide your light under a bushel any longer. Send me down a few more balls."

That was how Gay Hamilton began her career as star bowler of Rolsham Manor School.

The games captain insisted upon systematic practice, and when the list of players for the next big match came out, Gay's name appeared on it.

A lower fifth girl in the first eleven!

Her colleagues in the form, especially Mary Diana and Co., were sufficiently thrilled and made much of her, an example followed by most of the girls, only Veronica and one or two others withholding their congratulations.

When the match came off, the games captain's action was justified, for Gay was the heroine of the day. The girls from the rival school were a little inclined to smile

## Gay Hamilton—Bowler 89

when so young a girl was put on to bowl, but they did not smile long, for not one of them could stand up against Gay's bowling, and the match ended in a single innings victory for Rolsham Manor.

## CHAPTER XII

### A MIDNIGHT ADVENTURE

"WHAT are you doing, Gay? Why are you getting dressed?"

Mary Diana had been awakened by a slight sound, and, sitting up in bed, had been surprised to see Gay Hamilton stealthily dressing by the light of the brilliant moonlight that streamed in at the windows.

"Hush!" replied Gay, in a stage whisper. "It's full moon."

"Well, what of that?"

Mary Diana slipped noiselessly out of bed and came nearer so that there would be less chance of waking the other girls.

"Don't you remember Veronica's challenge?" muttered Gay, still speaking softly, but with a decidedly impatient movement of her shoulders. "The ghost of the old Grange is supposed to walk when the moon is at the full and I am going to walk round the house."

"You are going to do nothing of the sort," declared Mary Diana, laying a firm hand on Gay's arm and unconsciously raising her voice. "Don't be such a silly, Gay."

Gay threw off M.D.'s restraining hand and slipped her gym. frock over her head.

## A Midnight Adventure 91

"I *am* going," she said, as her face appeared again, "and you can't stop me."

"Hello, what's the row?" demanded a sleepy voice from Joyce's bed. "Is the house on fire or something?"

More shuffles from other beds and further demands to be told the reason for the disturbance.

"Gay has got a bee in her bonnet," said Mary Diana. "She says she is going to walk round the Grange because it is full moon, when the ghost is supposed to walk, just to show Veronica Warner that she doesn't believe in ghosts and isn't scared."

"What silly nonsense!" yawned Maisie. "Get into bed and let's snooze off again."

"Rather!" agreed Nora. "Take my advice and let sleeping ghosts lie."

"I'm *going*," said Gay obstinately.

"*How* are you going?" queried Rufus. "You know the doors downstairs are all heavily barred and if you try to open them you'll make noise enough to rouse the whole place and have the kids all yelling 'fire' and 'burglars' and 'blue murder,' especially in view of the robberies in the neighbourhood lately."

"I'm not going downstairs, and shan't make any noise to speak of at all," said Gay. "I'm going out here."

She pointed to the end window, and the girls fairly gasped.

"What on earth do you mean?" cried Maisie. "You'll break your neck."

"No, I shan't," frowned Gay. "Haven't you noticed

## 92 "Miss Spitfire" at School

the rain-water pipe just outside this window? It isn't close to the wall; it is several inches out and there are supports every few feet that make it almost as easy as climbing down a ladder. I've examined it in the day-time."

"What's the use of getting into trouble for the sake of Veronica's silly dare?" asked Mary Diana. "Come along, take your things off and get into bed."

Gay's face took on a mutinous look.

"I tell you I'm going," she said, firmly. "You can all of you sneak if you want to. I don't care. But Veronica Warner is not going to call *me* a funk. So there!"

"All right!" said Mary Diana, quietly beginning to don some clothes. "Go, then, but if you go—I go. You are not going alone."

"Hear M.D. doing the self-abednegoin' stunt?" laughed Maisie.

Maisie's little habit of occasionally saying words that were entirely wrong though sounding something like the right one was well known to her friends, though they were never quite certain whether she did it through ignorance or inadvertence, or the mere desire to be funny and make the others laugh.

But if the last, then this time it failed, for nobody felt much like being amused.

It was now Gay's turn to say "What nonsense!"

And she said it with vigour, adding: "Of *course* I'm going alone."

But Mary Diana could be as determined as she, and in the argument both voices rose above the whis-

## A Midnight Adventure 93

pering stage with an occasional interjection from one or other of the interested onlookers.

"If you make so much noise about it," said Joyce with, for her, an impatient gesture, "you'll rouse somebody and there'll be no expedition at all, alone or together. The one sure thing would be that we should all be hauled over the coals for being awake at this time of the night."

"And arguing's no good, anyway," said Gay. "I'm going—and here goes."

She slipped out of the window on to the sill and the girls watched in silence while she carefully negotiated the beginning of the descent and her head disappeared.

Mary Diana waited a moment, then prepared to follow.

"You are not really going, are you, M.D.?" asked Rufus.

"Yes, I am."

"Don't do anything so silly," advised Nora. "If that silly little owl likes to get into trouble for the sake of that impossible Veronica—well—let her, say I."

But Mary Diana shook her head.

"I can't let her go alone," she said, and, in her turn, climbed on to the window sill and began the journey that, according to Gay, was "almost as easy as going down a ladder," while four heads were poked out of the window watching anxiously.

"She found it by no means as easy as Gay had averred, for a projecting corner of the building threw that

## 94 "Miss Spitfire" at School

particular spot into shadow, and she had not had the advantage of studying the lie of the land, so to speak, in the daylight, as Gay had done.

She had to cling desperately to the rain-pipe while she felt with her feet for the next rung, and about half way down her head began to whirl and she felt she was losing her nerve. What if she lost her hold and fell headlong to the paved terrace beneath!

She closed her eyes and clung with hands and knees to the pipe, utterly unable to move. Only a few moments, then a swift wordless prayer for help from the very depths of her heart—her head cleared, her nerves were steadied and she finished the descent quickly and safely and ran swiftly in the direction Gay had taken.

Only a few moments of peril, but as she ran she knew she had learned a truth that she would never forget as long as she lived. Whatever life might bring her she knew she would always remember that there is Someone to hear a cry for help in time of need.

She caught Gay up just as that stubborn young person was climbing over the lowest part of the wall and the two dropped down almost together on to the road.

"You were a duffer to come," remonstrated Gay, "but it is almost worth while risking getting into a row to be out on a night like this."

"It certainly is glorious," admitted Mary Diana, as the two girls ran easily along the road side by side.

Everything was very still, the wonderful moonlight flooding the silent landscape, the shadows dark and clear cut.

## A Midnight Adventure 95

Presently the two girls slackened their pace to a walk as they turned into the lane. They came to the old house, and at the gate Gay stopped.

"You must stay here, M.D.," she said. "I am going round the place by myself. Veronica would say I had funk'd it if you came with me."

"Well, do a sprint and be as quick as you can," replied Mary Diana. "I'll wait here, but hurry, then we can get back to bed again. I am beginning to feel most awfully sleepy."

"All right! I shan't be many minutes. After all, perhaps it is a good thing that you did come. Veronica might doubt my word, but she will believe you if you say I went round the Grange."

And neither girl realised what a tribute that was to M.D.'s honesty.

Gay set off up the drive and soon disappeared from view.

Her light running footsteps seemed to sound quite loudly in the almost unearthly stillness, then died away and Mary Diana shivered a little at the intense feeling of loneliness as she waited by the ruined gate. A little breeze sprang up and made a sighing sound in the tall tree-tops that added to the eeriness, and a long low wail came from among the shadows of the old house. Mary Diana sped up the drive, footsteps sounded again, and Gay reappeared, just as that unearthly wail was repeated. Involuntarily Gay hastened her steps and in spite of herself clutched a little eagerly at Mary Diana's arm.

"What's that?" she whispered.



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"I don't know," Mary Diana whispered back.

The two girls stood quite still, holding on to one another and again came that wailing cry, more sepulchral and blood-curdling than ever.

The girls drew a little closer together, and then to their discomfort, a tall white something came gliding round the farther end of the house.

Even Gay felt a cold thrill down her spine, and Mary Diana gasped, and as the apparition came towards them, both turned to flee.

But the ghost only came as far as the front door stood a moment then returned by the way it had come, and Mary Diana's common sense returned.

"Look here!" she said, stopping short, "*that* is no ghost! It's just somebody dressed up in a sheet. Come along! We'll try and find out where it goes. We can do a run if necessary." Hand in hand and making as little noise as possible, they hurried round the house in the wake of the "apparition," only to find that the thing had disappeared, apparently into thin air.

But as they stopped, uncertain what to do next, Gay clutched her companion's arm.

"Did you hear that?" she whispered.

"Yes," replied M.D. "It was a window being closed very carefully."

"That means," said Gay, "that someone is using the old house. Well, we can't do anything to-night. We'll come and have a look round some time in the daylight and see if we can solve the mystery."

"All right," agreed Mary Diana. "We had better

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do a trot and get back to bye-byes. But *it* has been exciting."

It did not take them long to reach Rolsham Manor, and when they came in sight of the dormitory windows Mary Diana stopped and an exclamation of surprise and irritation escaped her.

"Just look at that!" she muttered under her breath. "Would you have believed that they could be four such idiots as to leave the lights full on? I never thought of telling them to 'douse the glim'! It's not like Joyce and Rufus to be so lacking in common sense."

As quickly as possible she scrambled up the water-pipe and slipped over the sill into the room.

"Well," she began, in a stage whisper, you *are* the very limit, leaving the light on like——"

She stopped and stood motionless with astonishment, for Miss Denver rose from a chair and came towards her.

At that moment, Gay, in her turn, scrambled into the room, and also in her turn became almost petrified with amazement at the sight of the stern-faced mistress.

"So you have returned," said that lady in a particularly icy tone of voice. "You will both go to Miss Lancaster's room to-morrow at morning break. Hurry and get back into bed."

Before they had recovered sufficiently to reply, she had gone.

Then four heads bobbed up from pillows, and four voices were eager to explain how Miss Denver had come

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in three minutes after the two 'midnight adventuresses' had started out on their expedition, and how they—the four—had tried to make it plain that it was all Veronica's fault.

They had to confess that the mistress had not seemed particularly impressed by their explanation, and it had seemed a terrible time that they had waited for the delinquents' return while Miss Denver sat in their room in gloomy, nerve-racking silence. All four agreed that there was likely to be a "fine old shemozzle" on the morrow, or rather, to-day, for in a very short time it would be beginning to get light.

"Oh, well," sighed Mary Diana, as she slipped between the sheets, "it can't be helped now. Put out the light, Joyce, you are nearest, and let us get a little sleep to buoy us up for what we have to face in a few hours."

"You won't have to face anything," said Gay, as the switch clicked and the room was once more only lighted by the moon. "You only went to see that I didn't come to any harm. I shall explain to Miss Lancaster and she won't punish you."

"Umph!" grunted Mary Diana. "You can't explain away the fact that I was out of the school in the middle of the night. Good night! I'm going to sleep."

But she did not sleep for a very long time. Though she pretended to treat the matter lightly, she was really very chagrined about the whole affair. It was the first time she had ever been reported to Miss Lancaster; she knew the headmistress—whom she dearly loved—

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had a fairly high opinion of her, and it grieved her more than she could put into words that that good opinion should be lowered in any way.

And yet she believed she had done right in not allowing Gay to go alone on the foolish escapade.

## CHAPTER XIII.

### GAY'S OUTBURST.

THE next morning, the fifth form was thrilled at the tale of adventure. The two chief actors in the affair said very little, but Cecily and the others were eager to let Veronica know that Gay had *not* been a funk; not only had she been right round the Grange just after midnight, but she and Mary Diana had actually seen the "ghost."

The two girls had told nobody that they rather more than suspected that the so-called spectre was a very substantial one, neither had they mentioned the sound of the closing window. They had both averred that they had seen a tall white figure that glided round the house and disappeared completely when they followed—and left it at that.

They meant to investigate the matter at the earliest opportunity, and had no liking for having all the damsels of the fifth form surging round the Grange when they did so.

At the appointed time, Mary Diana and Gay presented themselves at Miss Lancaster's door, as requested by Miss Denver during that brief but unpleasant interview in the middle of the night. Both were rather more subdued than usual, wondering how their adventure was to end.

Miss Lancaster's manner was decidedly aloof when they entered and stood by her table.

"I shall be glad to know," she said, "why you were out of doors in the middle of the night, especially *you*, Mary Diana Allerton. I am more grieved and surprised than I can say that you, of all people, should have been guilty of such flagrant defiance of rules. Gay may not have realised what a serious thing she was doing, but there is no excuse for you."

"Please, Miss Lancaster," Gay began eagerly, "it was not Mary Diana's fault at all; she only went because she was afraid I might come to harm."

Here Gay proceeded to give a detailed account of Veronica's challenge and enlarged on the absolute necessity for taking it up. She was quite eloquent, but Miss Lancaster failed to be impressed.

"I do not see," she said, firmly, "why a silly challenge should make it necessary to break a very strict rule and run into many dangers. One, or both, of you might have been very seriously injured, even killed, if you had fallen during that dangerous climb. You will both bring me three hundred lines and lose your half-holiday for three weeks."

"But it's not fair," cried Gay indignantly, forgetting entirely the respect due to the headmistress. She had been so convinced that her explanation would exonerate Mary Diana that she was highly incensed to find that all her boasts to the girls and her eloquence before Miss Lancaster had gone for nought, and she and Mary Diana were to be punished equally.

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"What do you mean, exactly?" asked Miss Lancaster.

"It's not fair to punish Mary Diana," replied Gay sullenly, all the old stubborn rebelliousness showing in her face.

"I am the judge of that," said the headmistress. "Mary Diana knew it was wrong to go out of the school during the night. If she could not persuade you to give up your mad idea she should have come to me or one of the other teachers. You realise that now, don't you, Mary Diana?"

"Yes," replied Mary Diana, "but I was so excited I never thought of it, and—and besides——"

"You think it would not have been what is called 'sporting.' I quite agree that tale-bearing in the ordinary way is unpleasant, and to be deplored, but there are times when it is a *duty* to tell what you know. And this was one of them. You admit that you deserve an imposition?"

"Yes, Miss Lancaster."

"Then, as I said, you will both bring me three hundred lines."

Quite suddenly Gay's temper flared up, headmistress or no headmistress.

"I won't do them," she exploded. "It's not fair. You should punish Veronica, not us."

"That's nonsense," remarked Miss Lancaster. "You had better go and begin your lines at once instead of going in the playing-fields."

"I *won't*!" persisted Gay, stamping her foot.

"If you will not do *your* share of the lines, Gay," said the headmistress, quietly, "Mary Diana must do them

all. Six hundred lines, done by both of you or by Mary Diana alone, must be shown to me as soon as possible."

Mary Diana looked up a little astonished. It was so unlike the headmistress to be unjust. She found Miss Lancaster's eyes fixed steadily upon her.

"Gay must be taught," said the quiet voice, "that breaking rules always brings trouble, either to herself or others—often both."

All at once Mary Diana's face cleared, for she vaguely realised that the headmistress was not as vexed with her as she had at first appeared, but was trying to get at Gay's better nature through her—Mary Diana. At present the plan did not seem to be working very well, for Gay remained defiant, and declared that she would not touch the imposition.

"You must settle that between you," said Miss Lancaster, and dismissed them.

Gay stuck to her guns, and when later in the day the matter was discussed in the recreation room, pandemonium broke forth.

Left alone with Mary Diana she might have come to her senses and agreed to do her share of the lines, and the matter would have ended peacefully, but the girls were indignant at the turn it had taken, and when Gay declared that if Mary Diana was fool enough to do the lines, she could do the lot, *she* would have nothing to do with them, even the girls of Beaton Number Four Dormitory, told Gay pretty plainly that she was acting unsportingly, to say the least of it. Unfortunately, in their excitement, they had



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not noticed that Veronica Warner was occupied with a book in one of the most comfortable chairs in the room, one with a high back that practically concealed her. She realised that Gay's temper was very nearly at breaking point and considered it an opportune moment to put in a taunting word.

She rose lazily from her chair and confronted Gay with a half-amused, half contemptuous smile.

"*Unsporting?*" she drawled. "You don't expect anything else from our dear Miss Spitfire, do you?"

Nothing much in the words, but her attitude, her expression, her tone of voice were all little short of deliberate insult.

It was the last straw that vanquished Gay's admittedly feeble effort at self-control.

Her face whitened with rage, and seizing a heavy dictionary which somebody had been using to solve a crossword puzzle, she flung it with all her might, straight at the mocking face of her tormentor.

But Veronica was ready for it and side-stepped smartly; the book flew harmlessly by her, only, to Gay's horror, to strike Cecily Frinton's head with a resounding thud.

Without a sound, the little girl sank to the ground and lay white-faced and still in a crumpled heap.

For a moment there was dead silence, then all was confusion.

Mary Diana knelt down and gathered the unconscious girl into her arms.

"Rufus, Rufus!" she cried anxiously, but there was no response.

"Run for Matron and Miss Lancaster," she ordered, "and somebody ring up the doctor. Joyce, you fetch a basin of water, and Nora, get your smelling-salts."

Gay stood on one side in a kind of numbed stupor and watched the efforts to revive Cecily.

"Rufus, Rufus!" she said, over and over again in her heart, for suddenly she realised how dearly she loved the little red-haired girl, who, through her own horrible temper and rebellious spirit, was lying so white and still. After what seemed a long time, but was really only a few minutes, Miss Lancaster and Matron appeared upon the scene, and Rufus was carried away and put to bed in the "san."

"I expect she's dead," remarked Veronica, as the door closed behind the little procession, "and you will have killed her. I always knew something dreadful would happen having a savage little outsider among us. Now, perhaps, we'll get rid of her, she's not fit to live with civilised people."

But Gay was past being hurt by taunts; she could think of nothing but that lifeless-looking face with its crown of brilliant hair.

Mary Diana went to her and put an arm round her shoulders.

"Don't fret, dear," she whispered. "I expect she's only stunned."

Gay's face quivered, but she drew herself away from M.D.'s touch.

"Don't—don't be kind," she said, in a hoarse whisper, "I can't bear it."

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With a little heart-breaking sob, she turned and slipped out of the room, away from her friend's sympathy as well as from Veronica's malice.

Slowly she mounted the stairs, hardly knowing where she was going, and then her heart stood still.

Two of the dormitory maids were standing talking together and as she came within earshot, she overheard a few words.

"He said nothing could be done."

Poor Gay! So full was her mind of the mishap to Cecily Frinton that she did not realise that the news of it had not yet spread through the school. As a matter of fact, the two gossiping maids had heard nothing of the affair and were discussing a matter that had nothing whatever to do with anyone at the school, but to Gay, the few words she had overheard could only mean that Dr. Terence had seen Rufus and could do nothing. The dear little red-haired girl was dead or dying, and ~~at~~ through her.

She turned and ran down the stairs, through the hall, out of the front door, down the drive, and away along the high road. After a while she turned into the woods and ran on between the great trees, scarcely seeing where she was going, and not caring, only anxious to get away from Rolsham Manor where she had caused such havoc.

On and on she wandered, hour after hour, beginning to feel very weary and footsore, beginning, also, to feel the pangs of hunger. It must be long past tea-time; and what was going to become of her, where could she go?

What if the night came on and she still wandering in the wood! She *must* find shelter, some farm or village or cottage——

She turned in a panic, caught her foot in the root of a tree and fell headlong, and when she tried to rise she was conscious of a sharp pain in her right ankle. That brought her to the end of her tether and she flung herself down at the foot of the great tree and gave way to a passion of tears.

## CHAPTER XIV

### KNIGHTS ERRANT

"HELLO, Dan! How's yourself? And how's the puppy?"

Dan Burfield turned with a smile to greet the school-boy, David Hamilton.

The two lads had met several times since the accident to the garden boy's puppy that had been the cause of their becoming acquainted, and in spite of the difference in their station, had become good friends.

Several times they had been out together on half holidays and more than once, one or two of David's chums had come as well.

Young Dan had lived all his life near the village, and from his earliest years had scoured the neighbourhood and could show the schoolboys many things of interest and tell them a good deal about the birds and animals and insects and their habits and ways of living.

This time David was accompanied by a red-haired, freckled youth somewhere about his own age.

"It ain't a half holiday to-day, is it?" asked Dan, puzzled at seeing the two boys at such a time.

"No," laughed David, "it's whole holidays for the time being. Some of those blighters in the fourth form picked up mumps, and the beastly thing spread so that the Head decided to send the rest of us home for a bit.

This chap—Macrae's 'his name—lives in Scotland, too far to go home—so his godmother, Mrs. Feltham, of Yellowlea Park here, suggested he should come here, and as my uncle, with whom I generally live in the hols, has suddenly been called to Canada, she asked me to come, too. So now you know all about it and why we are "wandering about in the middle of term. How is Miss Gay Hamilton getting on? Loving England any better?"

"Dunno," grinned Dan. "But she an' another young lady had a fair go-in last night. All the young ladies were that excited about it I couldn' help hearin' 'em talkin' about it."

"Why, what did they do?" asked David and his chum together.

"Yer know the tumble-down ole Grange along the Greenways Lane?"

David nodded.

"Well, it's haunted, y'know, or s'posed to be."

"Is it? I didn't know," said David. "Did you, Macrae?"

Macrae shook his head.

"Never heard of it, but it sounds priceless."

"Go on! Tell us more."

"Some of the other young ladies dared Miss Gay to walk round the ole house after midnight when it was full moon, as the ghost wor s'posed to walk then."

"*What* a lark!" gurgled young Macrae. "Did she do it?"

Dan nodded his head vigorously.

"She did *that*!" he said.

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"Some sport!" murmured David.

"She mighta killed herself an' the other young lady," proceeded Dan. "She got outter the dormitory winder and climbed down the rain-pipe, and so did the other one."

"Who was the other one?"

"Miss Allerton," replied Dan, "Mary Diana Allerton."

"My second cousin!" shrieked Macrae in a high falsetto. "Look here, Hamilton," he added in his natural voice, "if your weird relations want to kill themselves, *let* them, but they have no right to go dropping *my* relations out of windows and things."

David laughed and said—"Go on, Dan."

So Dan proceeded to give a graphic account of the midnight adventure of Gay Hamilton and Mary Diana as he had pieced it together from the scraps of conversation he had heard during the mid-morning break.

The two schoolboys were highly amused, and laughed unfeelingly at the picture of the girls climbing into their window to find the mistress waiting for them.

"What happened to them this morning?" asked David.

"Dunno," replied Dan. "They was to go to the headmistress but I didn' hear what happened afore I come home fer me dinner."

"I say," exclaimed Macrae. "Can't *we* go and root round the old Grange ourselves?"

"Why, do you want to go ghost-hunting, too?" laughed David.

"Not at midnight!" retorted Macrae. "I'm pretty

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certain, though, that somebody is playing ghostie for some reason or other. I vote we go and have a look round in the day time and see what we can find out."

"Brilliant!" commented David, giving his chum a slap on the back that nearly knocked him over. "No time like the present! Let's go this afternoon."

"Righto!" agreed Macrae.

Then David happened to glance at Dan and realised how his face had fallen.

"Like to come, too?" he asked.

"Love to!" answered Dan, "but can't. Must shove off now, or ole Bates'll be a'bitin' me head off."

"Look here," said David, "we'll leave it until Saturday afternoon, then Dan can come with us."

"All serene," agreed Macrae. "But we can't go Saturday, because we are playing cricket at Maxwell's place that day."

"So we are," said David. "Anyhow, there's no hurry for our ghost hunt. We'll let you know, Dan, when we can arrange it."

The boys parted, Dan mounting his push-bike and going back to Rolsham Manor for his afternoon's work, and the two chums hastening back to Yellowlea Park for luncheon preparatory to a cross-country tramp.

They had met Dan about two hundred yards from his home and had to pass the cottage on their way back. As they neared the gate they heard voices just behind the hedge, the woman's evidently in distress.

"I can't do it, really I can't," she said. "I can't let you have any more this week, I haven't got it."



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"Well, ye'll 'ave to get it then," replied a man's rough voice. "Yer don' want me ter starve, do yer? Anyway, ef yer don' stump up in a day or so I'll let on all I know. Wot'll yer do, then?"

A little cry of pain made David open the gate quickly, and just inside he found Lettice Burfield with a rough-looking man gripping her wrist in his grimy hand.

As soon as he saw David the unpleasant-looking customer dropped the woman's hand, and, pulling his cap well over his eyes, rushed round to the back of the cottage and made his escape to the common.

"Was he hurting you?" asked David.

But Lettice shook her head.

"He's just—just a tramp who was wanting money," she faltered. "And, Mr. David, please, don't tell Dan that—that he was here, will you?"

"Not if you don't wish it," said David gravely. "Are you sure you are all right now?"

"Oh yes, quite, thank you."

So David and Macrae continued on their way, but David felt quite certain that Lettice Burfield had not been speaking the truth when she tried to give the impression that the man was just a passing tramp, but he said nothing of his suspicions to his companion.

About half-past six that evening, they were returning from their cross-country expedition through Yellowlea Woods when David suddenly stopped with a low whistle.

"What's the matter?" asked Macrae, also stopping and looking back.

David was pointing down a glade towards something that was lying under a huge oak tree.

"Looks like somebody asleep," he remarked.

Macrae nodded and with one consent the two boys broke into a loping trot down the glade.

"I believe it's a girl," said Macrae as they approached the object of their investigation.

"What on earth is she doing here?" said David.

A few moments later they were standing gazing down at Gay Hamilton's troubled, tear-stained face.

"Must come from Rolsham Manor," murmured David, and at that moment Gay opened her eyes.

For a moment she lay still, then pulled herself into a sitting position.

"What's wrong?" asked David. "Can we help?"

But Gay only shook her head and looked more miserable than ever.

"You come from Rolsham Manor, don't you?" David tried again.

The girl nodded.

"Well, you'd better get back again as soon as possible," suggested Macrae, practically.

"I *can't* go back," muttered Gay.

"Can't go back!" exclaimed Macrae. "But you'll have to. What else are you going to do?"

"I don't know."

"Why can't you go back?" asked David, gently.

"Because—because I—I threw a book at another girl and it didn't hit her, but——"

But Gay could not finish, her voice trailed off into silence.

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"Naturally it didn't hit her 'if you aimed at her," said Macrae, with a chuckle.

But David held out his hand to her.

"See here," he said, "Macrae and I are going to take you up to the house. It's not far and you can tell his godmother, Mrs. Feltham all about any scrape you have got into. She will understand and tell you what is best to do."

Gay looked up in surprise.

"Mrs. Feltham!" she exclaimed. "You mean of Yellowlea? But I've been walking for *hours*. I thought I was *miles* away from Rolsham."

David smiled, and his smile was a very charming one.

"You have probably been walking round in circles," he said. "These are Yellowlea Woods and we are only about five minutes' from the house. Come along!"

Once more he held out his hand to help her to rise, but as she stood up a spasm of pain crossed her face.

"Hello! Are you hurt?" he asked.

"It's nothing much," answered Gay. "It's only a wrench I gave my ankle just now."

"Anyway," said David, "you look pretty well done in and you are not going to walk any more. Come along, Macrae, we'll make a chair and carry her."

"Righto, me lud," answered Macrae, "we'll have her at the house in half a wink of a monkey's eye."

Gay declared that she could walk, but the long miserable hours had taken the spirit out of her and she was too tired to make any vigorous protest, so that when the boys linked hands she yielded with a weary little

sigh and allowed them to carry her the quarter mile or so to Yellowlea House.

As it happened Mrs. Feltham was out, but Macrae sent for one of the maids and gave Gay over to her care, and soon the tired wanderer found herself in one of the spare rooms being undressed and put to bed like a child.

Curiously, as she entered the room she had felt a strange impression that she had been in it before, but that somehow it was different.

She gazed about her as Lucy, the maid, knelt before her to remove her shoes.

"There used to be a big round table in this room," she murmured dreamily, "and a door through that wall into another room."

Lucy looked up and smiled.

"I think you must be meaning some other place, miss," she observed. "I've been here five years and the room has always been pretty much as it is now, and I never heard of any door there."

"Perhaps I am," agreed Gay, a little doubtfully, for the first fleeting impression of familiarity had vanished and soon she forgot all about it.

As Lucy was bathing her ankle, Mrs. Feltham opened the door and came in.

The boys downstairs had already told her of their find in the woods and been commended for having brought the fugitive home with them.

She was kindness itself to Gay and promptly decided that the girl must stay with her that night at least.

"You are too worn out to bother about anything to-night," she said. "I don't think your ankle is very

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badly hurt, but I will ring up Dr. Terence and ask him to come and have a look at it."

She was amazed at the look of dismay that came into Gay's eyes, and the way in which the girl clutched at her hand.

"Not Dr. Terence," she gasped, "not Dr. Terence. He will tell them where I am and send me back and——"

Mrs. Feltham sat down and put her arms round the agitated girl. She had not intended that Gay should be worried to tell her story till she had had a night's rest, but now she decided that it would be better to get it all off her mind.

"Tell me what all the trouble is about, my dear," she said, gently smoothing the girl's tumbled hair.

And Gay found herself pouring out all the story of her wilfulness and passionate anger, and all her anxiety and remorse and terror because of the dire consequence of her action.

Never before had she found anybody to whom she could speak so freely. David had been right when he said that Macrae's godmother would be sure to understand. Though she did not make light of Gay's fault or condone her passionate giving way to temper, she realised how much Gay herself hated it, and how hard she really had tried to conquer her failing.

What a comforting, dependable friend Gay felt she had found; her whole being seemed to go out to this new acquaintance in love and gratitude.

"If Rufus is dead," whispered Gay, "I shall never be happy again."

"My dear little girl," replied Mrs. Feltham, with a

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comforting smile, "I don't for one moment believe that anything so dreadful has happened. I don't believe you could throw anything, not even a big dictionary with force enough to do any lasting mischief. I am going to ring up Dr. Terence and ask him, It is better that you should know exactly what has happened as soon as possible. I am also going to ring up Miss Lancaster. You may be sure they have all been very worried about your disappearance."

Gay shivered but made no demur.

A few minutes later the lady came back and her expression told her guest at once that she brought good news.

"It's all right, my child," she said. "Your friend was only stunned, and though she is being kept in bed to-day is already practically herself. Miss Lancaster is very relieved to hear that you are safe with me, and agrees that you had better have a good night's rest here before returning to school. So now you have nothing to worry about; I am going to leave you alone to have a little sleep if you can."

She stooped and kissed Gay, then went away.

Tears welled up into the girl's eyes, but this time they were tears of relief. Dear, dear little Rufus was alive and nearly well, and not lying cold and still as she had been imagining all through the long unhappy hours. Obediently she closed her eyes but she did not sleep, and presently the door opened softly and Dr. Terence looked in.

When he saw that she was awake he advanced and came and stood by the bed on which she was resting.

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"Well—well, Miss Spitfire!" he remarked, a little grimly. "So you have been at it again, have you?"

But something wistful in the dark eyes that met his made him repress his somewhat sarcastic remarks.

He sat down by the bed and laid his fingers on her wrist to feel her pulse.

"Poor little maid," he said, "you seem to have been having a bad time, one way and another."

"D-don't be kind, doctor," whispered Gay. "I don't deserve it."

"That you don't!" replied the doctor, with a smile that belied his words. "Now let us have a look at that ankle."

"Not much the matter," he muttered, after examination. "But you know what I am going to do with you. I am going to ring up my revered aunt and tell her that under doctor's orders you are going to stay here with Mrs. Feltham for a few days. Would you like that?"

Gay's eyes shone as she replied, "Oh, I *would*. You *are* kind, doctor."

"That's all right, then," said the doctor, with a laugh. "You seem to have fallen under the spell of your hostess already. Well, I don't blame you. She is a perfect darling, isn't she? If ever I had had a mother, which I never had, not one that I can remember I mean—I would have liked her to have been exactly like our dear lady of Yellowlea."

"So would I," agreed Gay with fervour.

The doctor laughed again and patted her head.

"You don't deserve such a treat," he said, "but I'm thinking that if anybody can knock a little sense into

your silly little noddle, she can," so I hope my experiment will bear fruit, eh, Miss Spitfire!"

For the first time Gay smiled, then grew serious again.

"I don't *want* to be 'Miss Spitfire,'" she said. "I do try not to be."

"I know you do, my child," replied the young doctor, with one of his kindest smiles. "And you are going to try harder than ever after this. You are going to be a credit to Rolsham Manor after all. Good-bye!"

And Gay was left alone once more to think over many things, and presently her eyes closed drowsily and she slept till Mrs. Feltham appeared with a tray and a dainty meal.

The next few days were happy, peaceful ones spent almost entirely alone with Mrs. Feltham. In some way that Gay could not explain the lady had a steady-ing, quieting influence upon her, and she told herself it would be much easier to be good if she could always live at Yellowlea.

She had met the two boys at breakfast the next morning and thanked them for their help, but she was not sorry that they spent most of their time out of doors and she saw next to nothing of them.

There was a twinkle in David's eyes as he glanced at Gay when Professor Hamilton's name was mentioned, but he made no attempt to claim cousinship, so Gay followed his lead and maintained a somewhat uncomfortable silence on the subject.

Dr. Terence came himself and drove her back to school. He talked about all kinds of things and never



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once mentioned her own wrong-doing, for which she was grateful.

Arrived at Rolsham Manor, she was bidden go straight to Miss Lancaster's room. The headmistress, realising that for once Gay was really sorry for what she had done, was kind and lenient, but all the same, the girl felt ashamed of her conduct and was conscious of a vague longing such as she had never felt before, to win the good opinion of the mistress whom most of the other girls so loved and admired.

Up in the dormitory Mary Diana and her friends were getting ready for a dancing class when Gay opened the door. Rufus was standing brushing her hair at the far end of the room. She looked her usual self except that a dark bruise still showed on her temple.

"Hello," she called, with a welcoming smile. "Here you are! Had a good time? You'll have to do a sprint and change in a brace of shakes or you'll be late."

But Gay's eyes filled with tears—Gay, who so seldom wept—and crossing the room she gently touched the bruise.

"Rufus," she said, speaking with difficulty, "I am so sorry, so very sorry and ashamed. Will you ever forgive me?"

"Pooh!" said Rufus, laughing a little shakily, "there is nothing to forgive. I'm as right as a trivet, and besides, it was really all the fault of that cat of a Veronica. She really is the limit, isn't she, girls?"

There was a chorus of agreement, and one and another plunged into tales of the many little annoy-

ances they had endured at the hands of their *bête noir* of the upper fifth, and then drifted into other general topics and gratefully Gay felt that her conduct had not estranged her room-mates; in fact, she seemed to have been drawn nearer to them and be more one of them.

## CHAPTER XV

### "OUR" ADVENTURE

AFTER the disturbing interlude Gay settled down again, and owing partly to some of the talks she had had with Mrs. Feltham, partly to the fact that Rolsham Manor was beginning to have its influence upon her, she began to work in earnest, and before long made the discovery that the acquiring of knowledge need not be a dreary drudgery but can be of intense interest.

Gay found herself trying to do her best, not only to please Mrs. Feltham and Miss Graham—and incidentally Miss Lancaster herself—but for the joy of success itself.

Mistresses no longer complained that the girl from Canada did not try and was always at the bottom of the class, and Miss Lancaster and the young science mistress made mental notes with keen though silent approval. The time had not yet arrived to let Gay know that she was being watched.

In games, too, she was making progress, earning more and more the approval of Jane Mainwaring, and needless to say, she was getting on much more easily with the girls in her form, especially Mary Diana and Rufus, who were now her real and very staunch friends.

## “Our” Adventure 123

One Saturday morning, about a fortnight after her stay at Yellowlea, Gay was putting her books away after morning school when Mary Diana came running up to her looking very excited.

“Gay,” she whispered, for Veronica and a few other girls were hanging about the classroom. “Come outside—I want to speak to you.”

Gay closed down her desk and followed her friend till they were well out of ear-shot, and Mary Diana caught her elbow.

“What do you think? Isn’t it a mean trick?” she said. “Somebody has broken in and stolen all Dr. Terence’s silver cups and things.”

“Oh, *what* a shame!” cried Gay. “How do you know?”

“I heard Helen Bracefield and Jane Mainwaring talking about it. They *were* indignant.”

“I should think so! Who could it have been?”

Mary Diana’s bright eyes gleamed brighter still.

“I have an idea,” she said, mysteriously, nodding her head. “You remember the ghost of the old Grange?”

Gay nodded in her turn.

“I believe,” went on Mary Diana, leaning closer, “that it was the thief, and he is using the old house as his headquarters. I believe if we could get in we should find the doctor’s things there. You know there have been several robberies and many little thefts in the neighbourhood lately, though nothing so big as this of the doctor’s. I think they have all been done by the same man.”

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"But how are we to find out?" asked Gay.

"Go there, of course," replied Mary Diana. "Instead of playing tennis this afternoon we'll take a stroll down the lane and reconnoitre round the Grange a bit. We may be lucky enough to find a window open. Are you game?"

"Oh, rather!" exclaimed Gay. "But we must be careful not to let Veronica know we are going; we don't want her and her crowd tagging round after us."

"No, it's *our* pie; we don't want her shoving her fingers into it. We'll go down to the playing-fields as usual; then, when you see me slip off, the lady being well settled down to a game, you follow in about five minutes. I'll wait for you by that low place in the wall where we got over the other night."

"All right. But——"

"But what?"

"Can't Rufus come, too? She'd love it."

"Why, yes," answered Mary Diana. "We'll pass the word to her this morning. I should have liked the others there as well to have their share in restoring the doctor's belongings. I only suggested you and me alone so that we should not attract so much attention. But Rufus won't make enough difference to matter."

So that afternoon, when Veronica was safely occupied on the tennis courts, Mary Diana slipped away indoors for her hat, and a quarter of an hour later the three girls met at the wall and with suppressed giggles, climbed over and dropped into the road.

It was a lovely sunny afternoon and the old Grange, when they reached it, did not look so forbidding as usual.

The girls passed between the crazy entrance gates and quietly made the circuit of the house. To their disappointment all the windows in the ground floor, where they were not securely shuttered were protected with rusty iron bars or had been roughly boarded up—one apparently recently.

Twice they walked round the building, and then Mary Diana, idly, not expecting any result, turned the handle of a back door. To her surprise, the door yielded and she nearly fell into what was evidently the scullery.

“I say,” she gasped, “I’m in. Come along, let’s explore.”

The other girls followed her, and the three tiptoed across the stone floor and Mary Diana gently turned the handle of the inner door. It creaked distressingly, and the girls stood still, ready to fly at any sign of danger.

But all was quiet, and once more they went forward into a large, brick-floored kitchen.

“We’ll leave all doors open behind us,” whispered Mary Diana, “in case we have to run for it.”

From the kitchen they passed into a long passage at the end of which was a fine old oak-panelled hall with several good-sized rooms opening from it, dimly lighted through crevices and cracks in the shuttered or boarded-up windows. They found no sign of life till they came to what was apparently the dining-room.

## 126 "Miss Spitfire" at School

Here some ashes in the fireplace, a cup and a tin plate on a packing case used for a table, a black kettle, and a few articles of shabby clothing lying about as well as a heap of straw and rags in one corner suggested that someone had been using the room.

"The Burglar's Lair," whispered Rufus, with a little splutter of laughter.

"Hush!" murmured Mary Diana. "Let's see what's upstairs."

Slowly and carefully they crept up the dusty staircase.

Halfway up Gay happened to glance over the banister and uttered a stifled gasp.

"What's the matter?" asked the other two, all three standing still.

"I—I'm almost sure I saw something move in the passage leading to the kitchen," explained Gay in a voice full of suppressed excitement.

Breathlessly they leaned over the banister straining eyes and ears, but nothing happened.

"Nerves!" muttered Mary Diana, with a giggle, after a few moments, and once more led the way upward.

A long passage extended almost the whole length of the house, with rooms opening out on either side.

One after another they explored them, and in the excitement of the "adventure," as they called it, and beginning to feel certain that they had the whole house to themselves, their voices rose above a whisper and more than once they indulged in little peals of laughter.

The last room they entered was a large one with a fine round bow window looking over the wilderness of a garden, and away between the trees to a glimpse of distant blue hills.

With one consent they made for the window and stood looking out, discussing what the prospect might be if only somebody would spend a bit of money on the place.

“It must have been a lovely garden once,” remarked Rufus.

“And could be again,” agreed Mary Diana, “if—  
What’s that?”

A slight sound made them turn their heads, but before they could move, the door swung to, was sharply closed, and an ominous click told them that the key had been turned in the lock.

For a moment they looked at one another in dismay, then, as one man, rushed to the door. They pulled hard at the handle but nothing happened; they beat upon the panels and shouted, in the hope that the person or persons who had shut the door had not known of their presence in the room, and, hearing the noise, would come and release them.

A forlorn hope, for though they hammered with their fists and shouted as loudly as they could, no one came.

The prospect was not a pleasing one. Nobody knew where they were; it was scarcely likely that anybody would think of looking for them in the deserted old house, not for some time, anyway; the window of the room in which they were locked looked over the gar-



## 128 "Miss Spitfire" at School

den and whatever noise they made they were not likely to be heard from the road, and, unless their captor or captors relented, they might have to stay where they were all night; in fact, they might never—— But *that* thought would not bear thinking of, somebody would be *sure* to come before matters became serious.

"Must be getting near tea-time," muttered Rufus, as she stood gazing disconsolately out of the broken window, "I'm *frightfully* hungry."

"So am I," said Mary Diana, with a sigh. "Aren't you, Gay?"

Gay did not answer. She was sitting on the floor near the door, her back to the wall, but with her head turned towards it in an intently listening attitude.

"What's the matter?" asked Rufus.

"I am almost sure I heard somebody moving stealthily about," answered Gay, springing up and holding her ear close to the door.

All three held their breath and listened hard, and were rewarded by hearing unmistakable movements. Somebody, apparently in shoeless feet, was certainly passing the door.

The girls renewed their banging and shouting, but only silence answered them.

Suddenly the stealthy footsteps sounded again, this time over their heads, and they gazed upward wonderingly.

"There must be a loft or attic or something," murmured Mary Diana in a stage whisper.

"Seems like it," agreed Rufus.

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While they still stood staring up at the ceiling they suddenly all jumped, for they had been startled by a heavy thud from over their heads, and the sound of rattling metal, followed in a few moments by a loud groan.

“What on earth can it be?” muttered Gay, staring at her two equally nonplussed companions.

“Wish we could get out of this,” said Rufus, impatiently. “It’s getting too jolly uncanny to be much fun.”

“And if we don’t get away soon,” added Mary Diana, “we shall be missed and get into a fine old row when we do get back.”

“If we ever *do*,” sighed Rufus.

“It’s no good getting rattled,” began Mary Diana, but stopped as another hollow groan came from above their heads.

Suddenly Gay’s face brightened and she ran to the window.

“I’m sure I heard voices,” she said, in an excited whisper.

The other two joined her and peered out as well as they could, and round the corner of the house came three boys laughing and talking together.

David Hamilton, his friend Jimmy Macrae, and Dan Burfield had chosen this afternoon, of all others, to make their own investigations at the Grange.

“Hello! Hello! I say!” cried Mary Diana, waving her handkerchief through a broken pane.

At the sound of her voice the three boys looked up, their countenances registering amazement very forcibly.

## 130 "Miss Spitfire" at School

David was the first to recover from his surprise. "Hello!" he said. "What are you doing there?"

"We are locked in," answered three voices.

"*Locked in?*" cried David, incredulously.

"Don't stand there with your mouth wide open," ejaculated Gay, impatiently. "Come up and let us out."

"Go along to the back door," put in Mary Diana, "you will find it open; we'll explain when we are free."

"All right!" nodded David, and he and his two companions disappeared from view. A few moments later the girls heaved sighs of relief as they heard foot-steps running up the stairs, then along the passage, and finally the key clicked in the lock once more, the door opened and the three boys stood staring at them.

"Hello!" remarked David, recognising Gay, "so *you* are here, are you? Well! well! well!"

Mary Diana and Rufus looked at Gay a little questioningly, and the latter explained that she had met the two boys at Yellowlea, but her explanations were cut short by a prolonged groan from above.

All six jerked their heads upwards and the variety of expression on their faces would have made them laugh if they could have seen themselves.

"Is that the ghost?" asked Jimmy Macrae, with comical solemnity, "or has this old hole got someone locked in every room? And anyhow, how did you three get yourselves here?"

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In as few words as possible, the girls explained the matter as far as they knew it and the boys listened intently.

“Incredibly thrilling!” was David’s comment in tones of satisfaction; the afternoon’s expedition was turning out much more exciting than he had expected. “Come along, you chaps, let us explore upstairs. You girls had better keep out of this.”

“Indeed, we’ll do nothing of the sort,” exclaimed Gay indignantly. “It’s *our* adventure, isn’t it?” she added, turning to her two friends.

“Rather!” agreed Mary Diana and Rufus, as one man.

“Now it’s *ours*,” put in Macrae. “Girls are always in the way when things have to be done.”

“Well——”

“Of all the—the——”

“Talk about——”

Three irate damsels glared at Jimmy’s freckled face and failed to find words to express their indignation.

“You look like three ruffled hens,” laughed the cheeky boy. “You must admit, y’know, that you made a pretty mess of your adventure as you call it. Do you think *we* would have been trapped so easily?”

“Oh, shurrup, Macrae,” said David, giving his chum a dig. “I don’t suppose we are going to find anything dangerous. Let them come if they want to. But see here,” he added, addressing the female part of his audience, “will you promise to do exactly as you are told, and run when we tell you?”

Gay’s eyes flashed again and she was about to protest vigorously when Mary Diana intervened.

## 132 "Miss Spitfire" at School

"For pity's sake, stop 'arguing," she cried, "and let's get on with it. For all we know that groaning may mean that somebody is in pain and we stand here and *talk* and do nothing."

"Like Members of Parliament," chuckled Macrae. "Lead on, old chap!"

David led the way, and the others all trailed after him, but to their astonishment they could find no sign of any staircase leading to an upper floor.

"Queer!" remarked Macrae.

"Incredibly queer!" agreed David.

"Rum set out," murmured Dan.

"Here we are!" called Gay, in a kind of gasping whisper.

She had opened a cupboard at the end of the passage and discovered that it was no cupboard at all but contained a kind of ladder stair up which she sprang before the boys could stop her.

The rest of the party lost no time in following her, and they found themselves in a long low space just under the tiles lighted only through gaps in the broken roof.

The groaning they had heard was more distinct now and came from the other end of the place, and the boys and girls began to make their way in that direction. The going was not too good, for though in places there was evidence of rough flooring, in others there were only old oaken beams between which the laths and plaster of the ceiling of the room below would not have borne the weight of the young people.

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Happily, Macrae had stuck an electric torch into his pocket upon starting out and now produced it, much to the silent satisfaction of the girls, who rather suspected the presence of rats.

At the end of the house the loft turned a corner and ended in a kind of small chamber, the farther wall of which was formed by the brickwork of a wide old chimney.

And here they came upon the object of their quest.

In the corner lay a shabby, white-faced man, his features drawn with pain, his left arm pinned down by a heavy oaken rafter and a pile of bricks that had fallen from the chimney.

And all around lay a collection of silver cups and bowls of various shapes and sizes.

“ Doctor Terence’s prize cups ! ” cried Rufus. “ This must be the thief who stole them. ”

The man moved and tried once more to free his arm, but the effort was too much and he collapsed in a dead faint.

“ Broken his arm, I expect, ” said David, kneeling down by the man’s side. “ Dan, ” he added, “ you scoot off and find Dr. Terence. Macrae and I will move all these bricks and rubbish. ”

“ And we’ll help ! ” said Mary Diana.

“ All right ! ” nodded David, “ as long as you don’t get in the way. ”

Gay turned on him, but changed her mind about uttering the indignant words on her lips and began gathering together the silver articles and standing them

## 134 "Miss Spitfire" at School

in a row along a big beam, and presently condescended to help the others in removing the fallen bricks and finally in lifting the heavy piece of wood that held the poor man's arm down.

"I don't think we'll touch it," said David, a compassionate ring in his voice. "We should probably only cause the poor chap a lot of unnecessary pain, and doc. will soon be here."

"What is the time?" asked Mary Diana.

David held his wrist for her to look at his watch.

"A quarter of an hour to tea-time," she exclaimed.

"Why, I thought it was ever so much later than that," cried Rufus. "I thought it was past tea-time before the boys came."

"That's because time passes so slowly when you have nothing to do," said Gay.

"Especially when you are locked up," grinned David.

"We shall have to go," decided Mary Diana. "There is just time to get back, and we don't want to get into any scrape."

"What a shame!" sighed Rufus. "I did want to see the end of all this."

"It's a bit tough," agreed David, sympathetically, "but Macrae and I will prime Dan with all that happens and you'll be able to get it from him."

"Thank you," said Rufus, screwing up her face, "but it's not quite the same thing. It's such a tame ending to an adventure."

"No good grumbling," sighed Mary Diana. "Come along, we had better be off. Good-bye!" she added,

## **“Our” Adventure      • 135**

holding out her hand to David and his friend, “and thank you for coming and letting us out.”

“Yes, rather!” put in Rufus, shaking hands in her turn, but Gay only smiled slightly at Macrae and gave the faintest suspicion of a nod in David’s direction and led the way to the ladder. •



## CHAPTER XVI

### THE BURGLAR

SOON after the girls had gone the suspected thief opened his eyes.

Immediately David knelt down and spoke reassuringly.

"Don't worry," he said. "You've had an accident, and I'm afraid you've broken your arm; but we have sent for Dr. Terence and he'll soon be here and make you more comfortable."

To his surprise a look of positive anguish came over the man's face, and, in spite of the pain in his arm, he half raised himself and clutched at David with his uninjured hand.

"Not him—not him," he pleaded. "Don't let Dr. O'Connor come; he'll never forgive me."

"You *must* have your arm properly set," said David gravely, "and he is the only doctor anywhere near, and you needn't be scared of him, he's a downright good sort."

"I know," sighed the man, "that's why——"

He did not finish his sentence, but lay still with such a look of misery on his face that the boys could not help but feel sorry for him, thief though he probably was.

Presently voices and footsteps sounded and Dan and Dr. Terence appeared.

The moment the latter's eyes rested upon the man he hurried to his side.

"Why, Bill," he exclaimed, "I had no idea I should find *you* here."

Bill half raised himself on his right elbow. "I didn' know as they wor yourn," he almost sobbed. "I didn'—I didn'. I saw 'em through the winder—it worn't your name on the brass thing at the gate, an' I thought as they wor someun else's—or I wouldn' never have took 'em."

The doctor glanced at the row of silver articles on the beam where Gay had placed them.

"Oh—those things!" he said. "Never mind about them now. Let's have a look at your arm. The thing I'm most sorry about is that you know you promised to go straight when you left the hospital."

"I know," replied the man, looking very distressed, "an' I tried—I *did*—on'y when a chap has once bin in quod, nobody'll give him a chanst. Then they guv me another six months when I hadn' done nothin' an'—it didn' seem no good, an'——"

"All right, old chap," said Dr. Terence, quietly. "You can explain later. Don't talk any more now. I am afraid I shall have to hurt you a bit."

David slipped to his knees and took the man's rough, grimy right hand in his.

"Hold on," he said, gently, "it may help you."

The doctor got to work and the man made no sound, only set his teeth and gripped David's hand hard, and soon the limb was properly set and done up in splints.

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"There!" said the doctor, "how we can move you out of here."

"Are you sending me to the station, sir?" asked Bill, as with help he got to his feet.

"Station?" queried Dr. Terence. "What station?"

"The—the police," muttered Bill.

"Gracious no, man!" replied the doctor. "You are coming home with me. Police, indeed! What you want is a bath, a good meal and a comfortable bed."

"An' these things—" began Bill, pointing to the doctor's property.

But Dr. Terence laughed and took the man's right arm.

"Come along and don't worry," he said. "The silly old pots will be all right where they are for a day or two, unless you two boys like to bring them along."

"Rather!" answered David and Macrae together, and packing the doctor's property in an old sack they found lying around, followed the doctor and his patient.

In a short time, Bill was settled in more comfortable surroundings than he had known since the time he had been in hospital and had first met Doctor Terence.

He was not allowed to talk until he had had a good night's rest, but the next morning, knowing that his patient would not be happy until he had made a clean breast of everything, the doctor sat down beside him and bade him tell his story.

Bill began slowly at first, but after a while spoke more fluently.

He began by making a statement that considerably surprised the doctor, namely that he was a native of the village, and Lettice Burfield's brother.

"But I never knew Lettice had a brother," said the doctor.

"No," replied Bill, "scarce anybody did, cos I wor brought up by me grannie in London."

In London, Bill went on to explain, he had early taken to bad ways and caused his grandmother no end of trouble. He had only once seen his sister Lettice, and that was just after her first marriage. After his grandmother's death he had definitely given himself up to a life of dishonesty, and just before the accident that sent him to the hospital, he had suffered a term of imprisonment. He had conceived an almost dog-like devotion for the young doctor under whose care he was placed in the hospital and really wanted to "go straight." But the stigma of prison clung to him and the struggle was too hard. He wandered down to his native village after his second term of imprisonment, found the empty old Grange, and made it his headquarters; it at least gave him a roof over his head, and he kept himself by petty pilfering, an occasional more elaborate robbery and a little pressure on his sister, who had never mentioned the ne'er-do-weel to Daniel Burfield or young Dan.

In order to keep people away from the Grange he had now and again played the ghost.

One day he saw the doctor's silver through the window and decided to help himself and with the proceeds pay his passage to Canada. There might be more chance for a chap there. How was he to know that Dr. Terence, with characteristic Irish happy-go-luckiness, had neglected to change the name on the

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brass plate at his gate and it still held that of the old doctor, his predecessor.

It was not until Bill examined the things he had stolen in the seclusion of the Grange that he discovered that they were all engraved with the name of, and belonged to, the one man in all the world he loved. He hid them, meaning to return them at the first opportunity, but then the three girls from Rolsham Manor had appeared upon the scene, and fearing that they might find the spoil he had followed them quietly up the stairs and locked them in the big bedroom. He only meant to keep them there while he hid the silver more securely among the rafters in the roof. But while rooting round up there, there had been a fall of bricks and one of the beams and—well—the doctor knew the rest.

"The point is, Bill," said the doctor, when the story petered out to an end, "do you really *want* to go straight!"

"Yes, sir," answered Bill, earnestly, "with all my heart."

"All right!" said the doctor, rising, "then I'll stand by you. When that arm is strong again we'll see about getting a job. What is your special line?"

"Ain't got none, sir," replied Bill. "When I lef' school I was van boy for a bit, then I got the dole an' then I didn't have no job long enough to get a dole or anythin'."

"Humph!" snorted the doctor. "All the millions spent on education, and a boy learns precious little

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to help him earn a living when he leaves. And there are crowds like you. Bill, do you believe in God?"

Bill dropped his eyes and looked uncomfortable, as people who have not yet learned to know their Maker as a Father and Friend will do when His name is mentioned.

"Dunno, sir," he said in a low voice. "Dunno much erbout Him, reelly."

"And I suppose you were something like nine years at school and yet learned next to nothing about the things that matter more than earning a living. Those wasted millions again! I suppose you can read?"

"Yes, sir! Pretty fair."

"Well—that's something to the good," said the doctor, with a smile. "You'll have plenty of time on your hands the next few weeks and a little decent reading won't do you any harm. Well—I must go. Keep an easy mind. When you are ready we'll find something for you to do, and you can make a fresh start."

"Thankye, sir. You're that kind—I can't——" Bill could not go on, and the doctor laughed and touched his shoulder.

"That's all right, old man," he said. "It's about time somebody gave you a chance. Cheerio for the present."

"Please, sir," pleaded Bill, "will you explain to them young ladies as I never meant any real harm to 'em."

"All right!" answered the doctor. "If you ask me, they thoroughly enjoyed the experience. But it

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was a good thing for you and for them that those boys turned up just when they did."

"Yes, sir, that it was," agreed Bill.

Later in the day Dr. Terence found time to call on Mrs. Feltham, at Yellowlea, and tell Bill's story with such Irish eloquence that he enlisted her sympathies, and induced her to invent a job for the erstwhile vagabond and thief on her own grounds.

"I expect we are compounding a felony," laughed the doctor as he was taking his leave, "by helping him to a job instead of handing him over to the police."

"I am willing to take the risk," said Mrs. Feltham, with an answering smile.

Incidentally it may be stated that Bill recognised that at last he had a chance to make good and justified the kindness shown to him by becoming a very useful worker. He became quite a respectable member of society, and, in time, even lost the cockney accent he had picked up in his young wild days, and Lettice Burfield was no longer ashamed to own him as her brother.

## CHAPTER XVII

### TENNIS AT YELLOWLEA

"HELLO, Gay! Here's a letter for you," exclaimed Rufus, who was standing by the table in the hall where the morning's post was laid out for individual letters to be claimed by their owners.

"For *me*?" queried Gay, coming forward and holding out her hand for the big square envelope. "Whoever can it be from?"

It was certainly rather a surprise, for Gay Hamilton was the only girl in the school who never had any letters. The Professor had written a few times at the beginning of the term, but, finding his efforts wholly unappreciated, had desisted.

So Gay took the envelope and turned it over wonderingly.

"Can't make the post mark out," she remarked, peering at the heavy smudge over the stamp.

"Why not open it?" murmured Rufus. "You might find out then."

Gay laughed, tore open the envelope and began to read the note inside, her face brightening as she did so.

"It's from Mrs. Feltham," she explained, "asking me to tea next Saturday, and she says will I bring you and M.D. as well."



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"Topping!" was the comment from Rufus. "I expect she has written to Miss Lancaster as well. But how are we to get there? It's a pretty stiff walk."

"She says she will send a car for us," said Gay, consulting the note, "and she suggests that we should bring tennis rackets. Oh, dear! I suppose that means that those boys are still there."

"Well," said Rufus, "what's wrong with that? They are decent sorts enough as boys go."

"I don't mind the Macrae boy so much," grumbled Gay, "but——"

"You still have that bee in your bonnet about having no use for your uncle and cousin," laughed Rufus. "You're prejudiced, my dear, that's the only word for it. Come along, let's find M.D. and tell her about the invitation."

Mary Diana was delighted with the prospect of an afternoon spent at Yellowlea; there was no difficulty about obtaining leave, and for the next few days three girls watched the weather anxiously. But the fair spell held, and they were in happy mood when they stepped into the big car that glided noiselessly to the main entrance of Rolsham Manor to the very moment.

Even Gay had apparently decided not to let the probable meeting with the objectionable David damp her ardour, and she was astonished to find how pleasantly thrilled she was at the idea of seeing Mrs. Feltham again.

That kind lady greeted them graciously, kissing

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Gay quite affectionately, and led the way to the tennis courts, where a number of young people, including David and Macrae, who waved their rackets cheerily at the girls, were already in the thick of a game. Both courts were occupied, and Gay sat in a garden chair watching with interest the progress of the games that were played with vigour and huge enjoyment.

It was the first time that she had taken part in such a gathering of young people. Most of them were a little older than herself and her companions of school age, but what a gay-hearted, natural lot of boys and girls they were, evidently knowing one another well, and what a spirit of comradeship there was among them.

Gay played with various boys and girls and enjoyed herself thoroughly, and just before tea she and Jimmy Macrae faced David and a girl about his own age.

It was one of the hardest fought games of the afternoon. Macrae was not so good a player as David, but the latter had a somewhat erratic partner, who was sometimes brilliant and sometimes gave points away by missing the simplest balls, so the players were fairly evenly matched.

Everybody had agreed to play "sudden death," so that when the games were five all there was a little murmur of excitement, and both David and Gay, anyway, were evidently prepared to do or die. To their respective partners it was a game and nothing more, but Gay was longing to beat "Professor Ham-

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ilton's nephew," and David, feeling the antagonism, saw no reason for not playing his best. Gay was serving, and delivered a ball which left May Dugdale (David's partner) standing helpless, and called forth a round of applause from the onlookers. She repeated her effort, but David, standing well back, was ready for it, and returned it smartly, then running up to the net caught it as it came flying back and smashed it past Macrae into the corner. Fifteen all!

The next point provided a fine rally, all four players doing well, Gay eventually misjudging her distance and hitting the ball out, and the next point went to David as well, bringing him and his partner to match point.

The next two points were won by Gay and Macrae and then deuce was called several times. At that critical point in the game May was beaten by one of Gay's best, and during the fight for the next point lost her head, and when the ball came her way, hit at it wildly and sent it yards beyond the back line.

"Oh, I'm sorry!" she exclaimed turning to David.

But the boy only laughed; after all, it *was* but a game.

"Never mind," he said. "Come along and get some tea, we have all earned it, haven't we?"

He smiled at Gay as he spoke but she did not respond.

She and her partner had won the game, but somehow she did not feel particularly jubilant about it. She had a feeling of certainty that, pitted against David in a single, she would have had small chance of winning,

## Tennis at Yellowlea '147

and she could not but admit that he was a sportsman. In all probability the set they had just played would have ended differently if he had "poached." Again and again he could have taken balls that his partner failed to play, but he scrupulously refrained from touching any ball that was obviously hers.

Grudgingly Gay had to admit to herself that he had a way with him, that he was good to look at, and lithe and graceful, and a general favourite with old and young alike, and yet utterly natural and unspoilt. If only he had been Mary Diana's cousin or related to anybody but that impossible Professor Hamilton, Gay felt she might have been ready to own that here was another quite passable person in hateful England.

*"Hateful England!—oh—well—nothing like Canada—of course!"*

Tea was a very hilarious meal and after it, when the courts were in full swing again, Gay heard a voice behind her chair.

"Like to come and have a look at the horses?"

"Horses!" she exclaimed. "What horses?"

"The horses in the stables, of course," answered David, laughing at her astonishment. "Mrs. Feltham loves riding still, and she and Macrae and I have glorious gallops over the moors most mornings."

Glorious gallops over the moors made Gay remember glorious gallops over the prairies, and she rose and followed David's lead. She could even put up with the company of Professor Hamilton's nephew for the sake of the animals she loved.

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Arrived at the stables she was shown five or six beautiful creatures with glossy satiny coats and graceful arched necks, and forgot to be stiff and distant with her companion.

Her eyes shone and her face glowed, and she petted the animals and asked their names and gave them lumps of sugar that David produced from his pockets having purloined them from the tea-table, and was altogether quite different from the almost sulky girl he had hitherto known.

"I suppose you used to ride in Canada," the boy asked, stroking his favourite mount's glossy neck.

Gay nodded, and launched upon a vivid description of wonderful rides she would always remember.

"I don't see," said David, "why you shouldn't have a canter now and again. I know Miss Lancaster arranges riding for some of the girls at Rolsham Manor. Why not write to Uncle John and see what can be done? Or shall I mention it to him?"

But at the mention of "Uncle John," Gay's face clouded over.

"No, thank you," she said stiffly. "I prefer to ask nothing of Professor Hamilton. I do not own any relationship."

To her surprise David threw back his head and laughed as though she had made a huge joke.

"What is there to laugh at?" she demanded in an offended tone of voice.

"I beg your pardon," said David, a twinkle still in his eyes. "It was just a thought. But if you don't mind my saying so, I think you are a bit off it con-

## Tennis at Yellowlea 149

cerning Uncle John. He is a regular tip-topper, one of the very best; he has been awfully good to me and if only you——”

“He hasn’t been good to *me*,” interrupted Gay, hotly. “He wouldn’t listen to me when I wanted to stay in Canada; he tore me up by the roots out of my native land——”

This time it was David’s turn to interrupt. He laughed his gay laugh and touched her shoulder.

“If you are going to be melodramatic about it all,” he began, “you——”

“I’m *not* melodramatic,” cried Gay, indignantly. “I’m only speaking the truth. He has ruined my life and spoilt everything for me and I *loathe* him.”

David’s lips twisted, but suddenly the laughter died out of his eyes and he grew grave.

“My dear girl,” he said, firmly, “if I were you I should not say things like that. You don’t *know* Uncle John. When you do, you may be sorry for having misjudged him. But in your present mood it’s no use arguing. Come along, let’s see if we can get another game.”

“Very well,” replied Gay, a little loftily; and the two young people walked back to the tennis courts in silence, David realising that to speak of his uncle was the surest way of rubbing his companion up the wrong way, and Gay feeling that, in some way she could not explain, she had come out of the encounter with David with anything but flying colours.

“I say, you two,” cried Mary Diana, when they

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joined the group of laughing young people. "What do you think Mrs. Feltham has proposed?"

"Such a bit of fun," laughed Rufus.

"*Fun*, do you call it?" exclaimed Macrae. "It's perfectly absurd. I can't understand my usually sensible godmother proposing such a ridiculous thing."

"That's because you boys are so conceited," retorted Mary Diana.

"But what's it all about?" demanded David.

Several voices began speaking eagerly and David clapped his hands over his ears.

"One at a time, *please!*" he laughed.

Everybody joined in the laugh and then Macrae stood forward with hands on his hips.

"*I'll* explain the imbecile idea," he said firmly.

"As I said before, my respected godmother is generally, pretty sane, but she actually proposes that you and I David, my son, should get up a cricket team to meet—oh, goodness, where's the *sal volatile*—a team from Rolsham Manor Girls' School. Imagine our men being asked to meet a pack of *females!*"

The disgust put into the last word was indescribable.

"Well—why not?" asked David.

Macrae gasped and stared at his chum as if he could hardly believe his ears.

"*Et tu, Brute!*" he murmured reproachfully.

"I don't think it would be half bad fun," declared David. "You're not afraid of them licking us, are you? And if we *let* them, we shall deserve all we get."

"Hear his high mightiness," gurgled Mary Diana.

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"You wait until you have faced Gay's bowling," exclaimed Rufus.

David turned and looked at Gay.

"Are you an expert?" he asked.

Gay only shrugged her shoulders, slightly, but Rufus plunged into such praise of her friend's prowess that Jimmy Macrae said it made him feel sick.

"I've changed my mind, old man," he said, addressing David. "We'll have that match. I think some of these clever damsels who think they know all there is to know about cricket need putting in their place. *We'll* show 'em."

"When do you go back to school?" asked Mary Diana.

"On Monday," answered David.

"Got rid of the mumps, then?"

"Evidently," said David, "and I expect the whole place will reek of sulphur and disinfectants."

"Anyway," remarked May Dugdale, you have all been in luck to get extra holidays. I should think you rather like mumps as long as you don't get them yourselves."

"Oh, I don't know," answered David. "I don't think I much care for holidays in the wrong place. This term has been fairly ruined."

"The poor dear thinks he won't be able to cart away as many prizes as usual," mocked Jimmy, ducking to avoid David's threatened cuff.

"There's Mrs. Feltham," cried Mary Diana. "Let's ask her about that match."



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But Mrs. Feltham refused to make any promises or do anything in the matter till she had interviewed Miss Lancaster and the Head of the boys' school, who might both object to the plan altogether.

Then, as there was a little more time before the Rolsham girls must return to school, another game of tennis was organised and this time Gay played with David against two of the best of the players, and, putting aside her prejudices for the time being, backed him up splendidly, so that after a vigorous, exciting game they came out very popular victors.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### "A MEAN TRICK"

"PLEASE, Miss Graham, may I go into the library? I want to look up something for my essay for Miss Denver."

"Of course you may, Gay," answered Miss Graham, with a smile of approval, for here was another proof that the girl from Canada was learning to take more and more interest in her work, even the subjects that she took with Miss Denver.

The library was really the mistresses' sitting room, but the girls could get permission to look up references and even borrow books on occasion.

Gay made her way to the room which was empty, and soon found the material she needed for her notes. She was about to leave when a good-sized book on the table attracted her attention. She opened it and began to read, and soon became so absorbed that she did not hear the door quietly opened and fairly jumped when she heard the voice of the English mistress at her shoulder.

"What are you doing here, Gay?"

"I beg your pardon, Miss Denver," said Gay, "but Miss Graham gave me leave to come and look up some notes for my essay, and I opened this book

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and began to read and, oh, Miss Denver—isn't it wonderful? It is just like—like a flowing river."

Miss Denver smiled more kindly than she had ever done at the girl from Canada.

"John Henry Newman's *Apologia* is one of the most perfect pieces of prose that was ever written in the English language," she said. "I am glad to find that you can appreciate beautiful writing, but I think you will enjoy it still more if you leave it until you are a little older."

"Yes, Miss Denver," said Gay, picking up her notebook preparatory to taking her departure.

"And, Gay," added Miss Denver, "I want to tell you how pleased I have been with your work lately. You have given much more attention to it than you did at first and the result has been very satisfactory."

Gay looked up to say thank you for the unusual encouragement and noticed that the mistress was looking considerably paler than usual and that even as she finished speaking her brows contracted with pain.

"I beg your pardon," said Gay, in a low voice, "but can I do anything? You—you look so ill."

"It's only a headache, thank you," sighed the teacher, "but a pretty bad one. It will go off presently, I expect."

Gay reached the door, then with some hesitation, came back.

"If you please, Miss Denver," she said, "D—Daddy used to get headaches and he often said I sent them away when I smoothed his forehead. Won't you lie down on the couch and let me try?"

“Really I don’t know, child,” answered Miss Denver. “The pain will probably have to run its course. Still, you can try if you like.”

Gay beat up the cushions, arranging them comfortably, and pulled down the blinds, then, standing beside the couch began to pass her hand across the aching brow in gentle, soothing strokes.

Almost at the first touch Miss Denver closed her eyes with a grateful sigh and gradually, as the minutes passed, the pain grew less severe, and after some time, Gay, believing her patient slept, ceased her ministrations and crept softly from the room.

Just as she was closing the door as gently as possible, Veronica Warner came along the corridor.

“Hello, Miss Spitfire!” she sneered, “Why are you sneaking out of the library in that stealthy way? Been up to some mischief?”

“No,” replied Gay, coldly.

“Then what have you been doing in there?”

“That’s *my* business,” answered Gay, taking herself off.

Veronica watched her disappear, then applied her ear to the panel of the door.

She could hear no sound; evidently the room was empty. What had Gay been doing? And why had she closed the door so carefully as though afraid of being heard?

Veronica turned the handle of the door and went in.

The blinds were down, it was beginning to get dark, the corner where the couch stood was well in shadow, the library table and a high-backed chair intervening

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between it and the door, so that Veronica, glancing round the room, quite naturally failed to realise that anyone was present.

Idly she looked about her, but there was nothing as far as she could see that could account for Gay's presence. Suddenly her eyes fell upon a small cabinet which contained a collection of old snuff-boxes that had been left to Miss Lancaster by a brother—and she smiled maliciously. Here was a way to get even with the girl who had ousted her from the proud position of best tennis player in the fifth form. She approached the cabinet, opened the glass door, selected two of the prettiest of the little boxes, slipped them down the front of her tunic and hurried from the room. Prep bell would ring in a few minutes, all the girls would be in their respective class-rooms, the coast would be clear. Up the stairs she sped, quickly and noiselessly, into Number Four Dormitory in Beaton, opened Gay's drawer and stuffed the two little boxes among her gloves and handkerchiefs.

The things would soon be missed, and questions would be asked, she—Veronica—would testify to having seen Gay Hamilton coming out of the library in a decidedly suspicious, stealthy manner; search would be made, the snuff-boxes would be found and there would be serious trouble for "Miss Spitfire" all right.

A very clever scheme, or so thought its originator, but the best-laid plans have a nasty trick of "gangin' agley."

When Gay went up to bed that night she found a button on her shoe was loose and decided to remedy

the matter at once. She went to her drawer to find a little housewife she kept there. To be candid, she was not as neat as she might have been, and churned the contents of her drawer as if she were making hay, and to her amazement came across the two snuff-boxes.

“What’s the matter, Spitfire?” called Joyce—for Gay’s room mates, except Mary Diana, sometimes called her by the nick name Veronica had given her—and curiously, she did not mind it from them—“Been interviewing the Gorgon’s head or something and been turned into stone?”

“No,” answered Gay, slowly, “but see here, girls, how on earth did these get into my drawer?”

The girls gathered round and gazed with astonishment at the boxes in her hands. Nobody could throw any light on the matter, though there were plenty of wild suggestions.

“What are you going to do?” asked Rufus.

“I am going to take them straight to Miss Denver,” replied Gay.

“Good for you!” cried Mary Diana.

“But what if she thinks you took them?” queried Nora.

“She won’t do that,” said Gay, quietly.

“Of course she won’t,” declared Rufus, hotly. “*What* a suggestion to make! *She knows Gay.*”

Gay flung her a grateful glance, then marched out of the room and went straight to Miss Denver’s door, knocked and was bidden enter.

The teacher still looked pale and tired but the pain had gone and she smiled kindly.

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"What is it, Gay?" she asked,

Gay held out the two snuff-boxes, one in either hand.

"I found these in my drawer, Miss Denver," she said. "I don't know how they got there; I thought I had better bring them straight to you."

Miss Denver gazed at the pretty enamelled things in Gay's hands and a queer little smile touched her lips.

"I think I know how they got there," she said. "You did quite right to bring them to me. You can leave them here and I will attend to the matter. Now run along to bed, and will you please call at Number Four Dormitory in Seaton and tell Veronica Warner to come here at once."

Gay's eyes opened wide and the mistress smiled. "I was not asleep this afternoon as you thought," she said. "Just after you left, Veronica came in; she did not notice me on the couch, but went quickly to the cabinet, took the snuff-boxes and hurried out. When you said you had found them in your drawer I knew who had put them there."

"To try and make people think I was a thief," cried Gay, indignantly. "*What* a mean trick!"

"A mean trick indeed," agreed Miss Denver, "and she will be punished. If I report her to Miss Lancaster she may even be expelled."

Gay looked uncomfortable.

"I—I don't want anybody expelled because of me," she said, "even Veronica."

Miss Denver smiled at that very expressive "even Veronica," and laid her hand on Gay's shoulder.

“Well, we will see,” she said. “Perhaps as her plan to discredit a schoolfellow did not succeed we may decide to give her another chance, but she does not deserve it. Good night, dear.”

“Good night, Miss Denver, and thank you.”

Gay chuckled to herself as she ran along the corridors. Miss Denver, of all people, calling her “dear.” Wonders would never cease. Things *had* changed since the beginning of the term when she had been at loggerheads with everybody and felt herself an out and out stranger. Now, with about three weeks of the term to run, she was good friends with almost everybody, except Veronica of course, and—er—Professor John Hamilton and his nephew.

She delivered her message at the Seaton dormitory, then went on to her Beaton friends to tell them of the result of her visit to Miss Denver and listen to their indignant criticisms of Veronica’s conduct.

That young lady had a very unhappy quarter of an hour with Miss Denver, and had it made very plain to her that if there were any more such tricks she would be promptly returned to her parents as being unfit to mix with decent members of society. The mistress did not spare her, and besides telling her exactly what she thought of her, imposed a task that would keep her busy all her spare time for the rest of the term. The girl was furious at being found out, and though she thought it wiser to leave Gay more or less alone, it did not make her love her any better.



## CHAPTER XIX

### THE SWIMMING MATCH

SINCE the afternoon when Gay had nearly got herself and the young doctor drowned, Miss Lancaster had been reluctant to give permission for sea-bathing and only expert swimmers among the elder girls were allowed to indulge in the luxury.

The others might have felt the restriction more keenly if it had not been for the fact that Rolsham Manor possessed a very fine open-air swimming bath.

Miss Welham, one of the younger teachers, taught swimming, and took a great deal of trouble with the girls. She was an expert in the art herself and was perfectly at home in the water.

"Isn't it a pity, Miss Welham," said Rufus, one day, "that we don't have swimming matches on Sports Day? They would be frightfully exciting, wouldn't they?"

"They *would*," agreed Miss Welham, "but I think the Sports Day programme is long enough without them. But I do not see why we should not have a kind of inter-house match one afternoon before the end of the term."

"What a perfectly splendid idea, Miss Welham," cried Rufus rapturously, and everybody else agreed with her, and before long the matter was in train.

## The Swimming Match 161

Hitherto, swimming at Rolsham Manor had been a happy pastime, a recreation, a jolly frolic, but the teacher's suggestion of a match between the four houses had roused a considerable amount of enthusiasm, and the whole school gathered round the swimming pool on the day appointed.

Six girls from each house had been chosen to take part in the races, three over fifteen and three under.

Beaton was represented by Helen Bracefield, the school captain, Ann Murray, another sixth form girl, and May Gunter of the upper fifth among the seniors, and Mary Diana Allerton, Gay Hamilton and Jessie Carleton, who though under fifteen was brainy enough to be in the upper fifth, for the juniors.

Seaton was fortunate enough to have Jane Mainwaring, the games captain, in their senior team as well as Veronica Warner, who was as good at swimming as she was at tennis and cricket. All four houses had good teams, but the general opinion seemed to be that the contest really lay between Beaton and Seaton. The first race was for the senior championship, and was for two lengths. Beaton and Carmichael drew for the first heat, which Helen Bracefield won for Beaton. She did not play games much, but from her earliest years had lived near the sea and had learned to swim almost as soon as she could walk. Jane Mainwaring won for Seaton in the second heat. There was a great race in the final, Jane just beating Helen by inches, and Veronica only just missing tying with Helen for the second place. In the junior championship race

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Gay and Mary Diana won first and second places for Beaton without much difficulty.

After swimming there came diving competitions, the honours being fairly evenly divided, and then followed a variety of races and contests that caused the onlookers much amusement. One was the egg and spoon race, the "eggs" being ping-pong balls, horrid, elusive little floating things that were desperately difficult to retrieve if once they left the spoon. One ingenious contestant tried holding the spoon in her mouth, but it could hardly be called a success.

Another event that caused a good deal of laughter was the inter-house crocodile race, the six members of the four teams ranging themselves one behind the other, each girl with her hands resting on the shoulders of the swimmer in front. The case of the leaders could hardly be called enviable, they probably felt they had the whole weight of five girls on their shoulders, in fact one leader was forced under water and came up gasping for breath.

Then came the word-making race. Pieces of cardboard about four inches square each inscribed with a letter of the alphabet were strewn over the surface of the water, and the captain of each team was given a piece of paper upon which was written a word of six letters: she whispered the letters she needed to her followers and away they went, thrashing about the pool, searching for the necessary letters till a cheer told that the first complete word had been arranged neatly on the edge of the bath. Of course there were backward swimming races and life-saving races and swim-

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ming for style, each of the four houses having a share of success, so that when there was only the inter-house relay race to be decided, Miss Welham announced that Beaton and Seaton had exactly the same number of marks, the other two houses being one and two marks respectively behind them.

The young teacher, who looked charming and workmanlike in a blazer over her bathing dress, had enjoyed the swimming match as much as the girls themselves and had organised it well, for there had been no tedious waits between the events.

There was a buzz of excitement among the spectators when the swimmers lined up for this last race, for on the result would depend which house could call itself the "cock" house, in the matter of water sports anyway. Four girls from each house were to compete, the three seniors in each case and one junior, Helen Bracefield choosing Gay from among her younger team.

At the word the four first girls plunged in and for a few seconds swam almost level, but then began to straggle; the Seaton girl touched the edge of the bath and turned for the swim back almost a yard in front of anybody else. Veronica stood poised ready to dive the moment she touched "home," and Gay had to wait several seconds before she could make her dive almost over the head of the Beaton girl. But once in the water she lost no time in trying to diminish Veronica's big lead, cleaving the water with clean, long strokes that called forth cheers from the audience. Veronica heard the cheers and increased her efforts,

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but could not shake Gay off, the younger girl came on steadily decreasing the distance between them, till amid wild excitement, the two touched the edge of the bath and turned almost together.

"Gay, Gay! Come on, Gay!" yelled the lower fifth, thrilled at the thought that one of their number was doing so well. But Gay did not hear the cries of encouragement, every fibre of her being was intent on her task, every nerve a-stretch as she forged through the water till she felt her fingers touch the stone edge of the bath and heard the splash as Ann Murray went over her head for her part of the race, and many hands helped her out of the water as near exhaustion as she had ever been in her life. But her effort had made all the difference in the world. Ann Murray came in a good yard ahead of her rival of Seaton and more than that ahead of the representatives of the other two houses, who had lost a good deal while Gay and Veronica had been in the water.

Helen Bracefield had a pretty good lead before the last splash told that Jane Mainwaring had started in pursuit. Jane was a good swimmer and a high-hearted sportswoman, and had no intention of letting her friend have it all her own way. Foot by foot she crept up, but when Helen turned she was still a yard or so ahead. Halfway home Jane made a magnificent spurt and almost drew level, but Helen responded, and finally touched the goal about a foot in front of her rival.

So Beaton it was that won the swimming championship of Rolsham Manor School.

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The swimming match was almost the last event of importance in the term and all the thoughts of the girls turned to *home*.

"Are you going to spend the holidays with your uncle and David?" Rufus asked Gay one afternoon in the last week.

"Not if I know it!" replied Gay. "Thank goodness, Mrs. Feltham has asked for me to spend them with her, and his highness has given his gracious consent."

"I expect his imperious highness is jolly glad not to have you on his hands for several weeks," laughed Maisie.

"Imperious!" said Gay. "Good word, Maisie! It just suits him."

"Perhaps you will change your mind about him one of these days, as you have about Rolsham Manor," put in Mary Diana.

"What do you mean?" asked Gay.

"Don't you remember the first day you came?" said Mary Diana. "You said you would never do anything but hate it."

The girls were walking across the playing-fields and Gay turned and looked at the old house, with its beautiful gables and mullioned windows and the south terrace gay with geraniums and other bright flowers.

Suddenly she smiled and turned to Mary Diana, "And you said by the end of the term I'd love it. Aren't you going to say 'I told you so'?"

Mary Diana shook her head, but her eyes had a mischievous look.

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"*What* a little fool you must all have thought me!" sighed Gay.

"We did!" rejoined Rufus; "we mos' sure suttently *did*. We thought you were just about the very limit. Only M.D. stuck up for you."

"M.D. is' a darling," murmured Gay.

"Oh, well," laughed Mary Diana, "I always knew you were all right under the prickles."

## CHAPTER XX

### "JOLLY OLD CHUMS"

UNDER a great tree on the lawn of Jimmy Macrae's home in Scotland his mother sat dispensing tea to a group of gay people.

Gay Hamilton had had what some of her school friends would have called "a gorgeous time." First at Yellowlea, then a tour with Mrs. Feltham to Paris and Venice and Vienna and too many other famous places to mention, and now for three days they had been the guests of Jimmy's father and mother.

David Hamilton was of the party of course; his chum would have felt cheated if they had not spent at any rate part of the holidays together, and Mary Diana and Peter, the Allerton twins, completed the circle.

"I say, Gay," said David, helping himself to a wedge of plum cake, "do you know what Uncle John has been up to now?"

"No," replied Gay in a tone that implied that she did not much care either.

"He's been buying the old Grange."

Gay sat up very straight and stared incredulously.

"*What* Grange?" she inquired.

"Why the old ramshackle place where we went ghost-hunting. He has an army of workmen making



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it ship-shape, and when you go back to Rolsham Manor you will have him for a near neighbour."

"What on earth has he done that for?"

"Well," laughed David, "you needn't screw up your face as if you smelt a bad smell. Though, by the way, there *may* be curious odours about the old place, because he is going to have a laboratory there. He goes in for 'stinks' you know, otherwise chemical research."

Gay shrugged her shoulders and Peter created a disturbance by trying to drop a caterpillar down his sister's neck, and the Professor was not further discussed.

"Seen anything of Dalton, Macrae?" asked David, addressing his chum.

"No," answered Jimmy, "and don't want to."

"Who is Dalton?" demanded Mary Diana.

"Oh, a chap in our form," said Macrae, carelessly. "His father has taken David's place over the hill for the summer."

"You don't sound as if you like him very much," remarked Gay.

"Oh, I suppose he's all right," replied Jimmy, "but—oh, I don't know, he is always so jolly afraid of doing the wrong thing—strong on etiquette and all that rot."

Here Jimmy chuckled and cast a wicked glance at his friend.

"He is always watching to see what our revered Dave does. He is under the delusion that Dave is an aristocrat with a capital A and thinks that because he owns a *cawstle* he can do no wrong."

“Shurrup!” growled David.

“You should have seen his face,” went on the irrepressible Jimmy, “when, in the town one day, he ran into Dave and me coming out of Woolworth’s each licking an ice-cream sandwich. I have never found out whether his faith in Dave as an example was rudely shaken or whether he thought that because Dave licked ice-cream it must be the correct thing to do.”

“And listen to the nice kind little boy criticising his neighbours,” remarked Jimmy’s mother, pinching her son’s ear. “I don’t at all dislike the look of young Dalton and I have asked him to come next Saturday to dinner.”

“Oh, help,” moaned Jimmy, rolling over in the grass and nearly upsetting Mary Diana’s tea.

“Do you own a castle?” asked Gay of David.

“It’s called a castle,” replied David, “but it’s just—*home*.”

“Well,” demanded Jimmy, “isn’t an Englishman’s home his castle?”

“But I’m a Scot!” grinned David.

“Oh, bother you,” said Jimmy, “you are a regular woman—you always get the last word. Come along, who’s for a game of tennis?”

On the following Saturday evening young Dalton duly arrived in time for dinner, and was more or less cheerily greeted by his two school-fellows who realised that he was obviously overwhelmed by being plunged among a crowd of strangers, for a number of neighbouring young people had been invited to dinner and an impromptu dance after.

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After dinner Mrs. Feltham called him to her side and, like most people, he found it easier to talk to her than to the majority of folk, and soon he was telling her quite freely a good deal about himself. She soon discovered that he was not happy at school, that he was lonely and anything but one with the easy-going, happy-go-lucky crowd as he longed to be, and quite evidently, David Hamilton was his ideal.

"Look at him now," he said, directing Mrs. Feltham's gaze to the other side of the hall where David was the centre of a laughing, teasing group of boys and girls.

"Fancy *me* doing that," he added as the boy he was watching suddenly broke into a few steps of the Highland fling, unconsciously making a delightful picture of easy grace, his kilt swinging round him with an indescribable lilting movement, the light catching the hilt of the little dagger in his stocking as he danced lightly on his toes.

Mrs. Feltham laid her hand for a moment on that of the lad beside her.

"I have known David since he was a child," she said, "and I love him dearly—who would not?—but we cannot all be Davids, you know. Why not try being just—Robert Dalton?"

Robert turned surprised eyes on her, eyes that were his best feature and went a long way towards redeeming his rather heavy face from absolute plainness.

"Part of David's charm," went on Mrs. Feltham, "is that he is so unselfconscious and natural, he never for a moment stops to think what kind of an impression he is making. Forget about yourself, Robert,

as much as possible, and never worry about what people are thinking of you. You may not have dear David's personal looks and charm, but you have your own good points. I am sure you have a quiet strength of character that David himself would not need to be ashamed of; I *know* you would not do or say a mean, unkind thing and I believe, in an emergency, you would act wisely and promptly.”

Robert's smile softened his face wonderfully.

“I am afraid you think more highly of me than I deserve,” he said. And neither of them knew how soon her opinion of his promptitude was to be tested.

“Come along, now,” smiled Mrs. Feltham. “They are just going to begin dancing. Come and dance with Mary Diana.”

“She won't enjoy it,” murmured Robert, but he rose obediently, and in a few moments he was doing his best to keep in step with M.D.'s light feet, and to his astonishment, laughing at his own mistakes instead of, as he usually did, feeling as though he would like the floor to open and swallow him up when he trod on a girl's toes; for Mary Diana, like Mrs. Feltham, had the power of making shy, sensitive people feel at ease, and as the evening advanced he had to admit that, for once, he was thoroughly enjoying himself.

The hall was lighted by wax candles, and a table at one end, loaded with fruit and sweets, cooling drinks and ices, was also lighted by soft candlelight. Between the dances the young people gathered round and regaled themselves.

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About half-way through the evening, one of the guests expressed a desire to see a certain picture that hung in the gallery upstairs and David and Jimmy elected to take her up and show it to her. Several of the others were by the table sampling chocolates, and Gay, who was wearing a gauzy scarf round her shoulders, leaned across to reach a particularly toothsome morsel.

"Take care, Gay," warned Mary Diana, "your scarf nearly touched that candle."

It *had* touched it, for the next moment Gay sprang out of the group with her scarf ablaze.

"David! Come—quick—*David!*" she cried aloud, rushing across the hall for the staircase. The boy heard the frightened cry, and dashing along the gallery flung himself headlong down the stairs four at a time.

But quick as he had been, someone else was quicker. At the first hint of alarm Robert Dalton had rushed at Gay and tearing off her scarf had crushed the flames out of the flimsy thing with his hands, and David arrived to find Gay sitting on the floor, half-laughing and half-crying, with nothing worse than a ruined frock and a slightly reddened arm.

Her hostess and Mrs. Feltham hurried her upstairs while David turned to young Dalton with a new respect in his eyes.

"Good man!" he said, "that was a smart piece of work."

"*Rather!*" agreed Macrae. "He's a credit to the old school—what? If you can run like that, old man," he added, addressing Dalton, "and with your weight, why on earth haven't you played rugger?"

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Dalton only smiled and shook his head.

David had been observing him thoughtfully.

“I have an idea,” he said. “You know Robins is not coming back next term. If we can wangle it, would you like to take his place and share No. Three study with Macrae and me? Undiluted Macrae is more than I can stand; with you to take him off my hands occasionally it will be just bearable.”

“I *like* that,” began Jimmy, but David clapped his hand over his mouth.

“Can you put up with us?” he asked, smiling at Dalton.

“*Rather!*” answered Robert. Only one word, but its emphasis and the look in his eyes spoke volumes.

“By the way,” said David, “were you hurt at all just now?”

Dalton held out a pair of reddened palms.

“They tingle a bit,” he said.

“I should think they did,” said David. “Come and let’s put something on them.”

“Vinegar!” suggested Macrae.

“*Vinegar!*” cried David. “On *burns?*”

“Exactly,” crowed Jimmy, pleased for once to know something better than his chum. “I’ve often put it on; it’s top-hole when the skin isn’t broken.”

“He’s quite right,” put in one of the girls standing by.

“Come on, then,” said David. “And there’s another part of you that needs renewal,” he added, touching Dalton’s blackened, crumpled shirt front.

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"Macrae's things will probably fit you better than mine, that is, of course, if he possesses another clean shirt."

Jimmy closed one eye and glanced down at the immaculate starched part of his wearing apparel.

"It will be all right if my other one has come home from the wash," he said.

"Sorry to give all this trouble," ventured Dalton.

But David slipped his hand through the other boy's arm. "Don't be a silly chump!" he said.

And Dalton smiled as the three went upstairs together. It was much more a sign of friendship to be called "a silly chump" than to be treated with studied politeness, and he knew that as David Hamilton's acknowledged friend, his days as a lonely "outsider" were over. School would no longer be a nightmare.

The day after Mary Diana and her brother took their departure was a pouring wet one; Jimmy Macrae was prostrate with a bilious attack and in the afternoon Gay sat in a window seat trying to read and David wandered up and down the room with his hands in his pockets.

Presently he came and stood by the window.

"You're not afraid of a bit of rain, are you?" he asked. "It's not as bad as it was. Can't you put on a mac or something and go for a walk?"

"All right!" said Gay, who had herself been longing for a little exercise and fresh air.

Five minutes later she came down into the hall equipped with macintosh and gaiters and a little red cap pulled well down over her hair.

“Do you mind a few gates and stiles and things?” queried David.

“No,” answered Gay. “I don’t mind.”

They set out at a smart pace and took a footpath across fields and into a lane and presently over a stile into more fields, and then through a little gate into a wonderful wood with any number of splendid firs.

“Is this still the Macrae land?” asked Gay.

“No,” replied David. “It’s—mine.”

“Oh,” said Gay, and relapsed into silence.

On the other side of the wood the land rose fairly steeply and upon reaching the top Gay uttered another “Oh!” this time of sheer admiration.

They were looking down into a lovely little valley which ran down almost to the sea. On the edge of the cliff stood the ruins of an old castle, its thick walls almost covered with ivy, and on the opposite hill, against a background of trees, there was a lovely grey stone house, the creepers that climbed up its walls in places turning to wonderful reds and yellows and browns. Terraced gardens bright with flowers sloped down to a wall through which a gate led to the cliff top.

“What a *beautiful* place!” sighed Gay. “Is it——?”

She turned questioningly to her companion.

“Yes,” he said softly, “my *home*.”

The rain had stopped and the whole lovely view was flooded with afternoon sunshine.

“No wonder you love it,” murmured Gay. “I never saw anything like it. It’s not too big, it’s just right—it’s so—so *home-like*.”



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"I know," said David, "that's why I love it. I'm glad you like it, Gay. I always want my friends to love it, too, and—we *are* friends now, aren't we?"

"Not cousins?" asked Gay, with a smile.

"No," replied David, "I'd rather be chums, just jolly old chums. Will you?"

"Yes," answered Gay, holding out her hand, and another of her "feuds" had died a natural death.

## CHAPTER XXI

### THE PROFESSOR AND GAY

ONCE more the old house of Rolsham Manor had waked out of its holiday sleep and girls' voices were waking the echoes everywhere, 'and one of the liveliest spots in it was Number Four Dormitory in Beaton. This time nobody could call Gay Hamilton "a wet blanket;" she was as full of high spirits as any of them. She had been greeted rapturously by her room-mates and as an old friend by other girls. Helen Bracefield and Jane Mainwaring, Miss Graham and Miss Denver had all, each in her own way, shown that they were glad to see her again, even Miss Lancaster had hinted that she had a very different opinion of the girl from Canada from the one she had held at the beginning of last term.

Veronica Warner was as sneering as ever, and hinted more than once that if she told all she knew Gay Hamilton would be neither as happy or as popular as she was beginning to be.

But Gay was so happy she could afford to ignore Veronica's antagonisms.

Then, in the third week of the term the blow fell.

The girls were in the recreation room, arguing, chaffing one another, laughing and teasing one another,

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making the most ridiculous jokes and generally behaving like high-spirited young folks will.

"Oh, dear," cried Rufus, "you'll be the death of me, Gay, if you make me laugh so much."

"Gay, Gay, the gayest of the gay," chanted Mary Diana.

"Her name suits her now better than it did last term," laughed Nora, "doesn't it?"

"Rather!" came the chorus.

"She wouldn't be very gay if she knew the truth," said Veronica, acidly.

"Look here," said Gay, turning on her with flashing eyes and head held high. "You have several times hinted things like that. You will be kind enough to tell us what you mean?"

Veronica was suffering from a bitter jealousy and the growing popularity of the younger girl roused all the meanness of spirit in her, and now Gay's imperious manner, made her lose all caution, made her forget the possible consequences to herself and she blurted out the thing she had been longing to tell ever since she had found it out.

"The man you called your 'daddy' was not your father at all. He and his wife found you on their doorstep a wailing baby and adopted you. You are nothing but a foundling, with no right to the name you bear. For all anybody knows you are a wretched little gipsy brat. *Now* hold your head high!"

Gay was staring at the speaker with a face from which every vestige of colour had flown.

"It's—a—*lie!*" she said in a low, tense voice.

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"No, it isn't," muttered Veronica.

"How do you know?" demanded Mary Diana.

"Never mind," sneered Veronica. "The point is, it's true."

And deep in her heart Gay knew that Veronica at any rate believed what she said.

"And even if it is true," cried Rufus, hotly, "what difference can it make?"

Veronica shrugged her shoulders.

"Gay is Gay," said Mary Diana, as hotly as Rufus, "and we love her whoever her father was. Don't take any notice of Veronica's mean spite, Gay," she added, turning and putting her arm round the white-faced girl who had been standing motionless as if stunned.

At Mary Diana's voice and touch she looked at her friend with unseeing eyes, then putting the caressing arm aside turned and sped out of the room, out of the main door, down the drive, out into the road, as she had fled once before.

But this time she did not go far; she turned down the lane and in at the restored gates of the old Grange.

Workmen were still about the place, but Gay knew that Professor Hamilton had already taken up his residence there. The front door stood open and she went in and turning the handle of the first door she came to, entered the room and came upon him peering into a microscope.

"It's not true! Tell me it's not true!" she cried, standing just inside the door.

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The Professor straightened himself and looked at her white, strained face.

"What is not true?" he asked quietly.

"That—that Daddy was not my father, that I am j-just a nameless foundling."

Immediately the man's eyes flashed with angry fire.

"Who has *dared* to tell you?" he exclaimed.

"Then it is true," murmured Gay, with a pitiful little gesture of hopelessness.

"Who told you?" demanded the Professor.

"Veronica Warner," replied Gay, wearily.

"Veronica War—my solicitor's daughter. But how on earth did she get to know? Her father would never tell her."

Gay shook her head. What *did* it matter?

"Don't look like that, dear child," said the Professor, in a voice that showed plainly how grieved he was that this thing had come out, and Gay was trembling so that she was glad to let him put her in a big chair.

"Gay," he said presently, "I never meant you to know, and I am more sorry than I can say that any hint has reached you. Can't you try and forget what that mean, despicable girl told you? Ignore it all, dear."

But Gay sat staring straight before her with miserable eyes.

"I must know the truth," she said in a low voice.

"Very well," replied the Professor, seating himself in the chair opposite her.

"My brother was not a good correspondent," he said, "and never wrote very long letters after he

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settled in Canada. I never saw his wife, and when he mentioned that he had acquired a little daughter I never dreamed but that you were their own. About a week after I brought you to Rolsham Manor, I found a letter among his private papers addressed to me. In it he explained that you had been found one morning on the doorstep of the ranch with a paper bearing the words in printed capitals—"Please be kind to me." Inquiries were made, but nobody claimed you and they took you to their hearts and could not have loved you more if you had really been their own. My sister-in-law died soon after, and your father, if possible, loved you more than ever. He made a will leaving all he possessed to be divided equally between you and David. Unfortunately that will was not signed."

At first Gay hardly understood what that meant, then the blood rushed up to her pale face.

"Then—I have no money at all."

"A former will left everything to David, our eldest brother's son," said the Professor, reluctantly.

For a moment there was silence, then Gay spoke with difficulty.

"Is—is it *David's* money that has been paying for me at Rolsham?" she asked.

"No, dear," answered the Professor, "that has been *my* privilege."

"Thank you for telling me the truth," almost whispered Gay, "but, oh, what is to become of me?"

"Why, go on as you are doing," said the Professor.

"But I can't, I can't," cried Gay, despairingly. "I can't let you go on paying all that for me. I am

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n-nothing to you. What shall I do? What *shall* I do?"

She was wringing her hands together, looking almost distraught.

"Gay, come here, dear," said the Professor, holding out his hand and smiling kindly.

The girl looked at him and for the first time saw in him a likeness to the "Daddy" she had loved so dearly.

She rose and went slowly across to him and stood beside him, and he put an arm round her and drew her down to the arm of his chair.

"Listen to me, little girl," he said. "My brother adopted and loved you as his own daughter, I want to adopt and love you as my own niece. I am a crusty old bachelor with more money than I can possibly need. When David is of age he will have as much as is good for him, and I would like to justify my existence by spending a little on a niece whom I am prepared to love almost as dearly as I love my nephew. If it will make you happier I am willing that you should train to earn your own living later on, but now forget you ever disliked me and let me be your 'Uncle John' at last."

And Gay broke down and flinging her arms round his neck clung to him in a storm of sobbing, while he held her close and petted and comforted her as tenderly as ever "Daddy" had done when, as a tiny child, she had sometimes hurt herself, until the weeping gradually ceased and she was able to sit up and dry her eyes and feel that life would not be so impossible with a rock like Uncle John to lean upon.

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After awhile he took her back to Rolsham Manor and Miss Lancaster was told the story, and Veronica Warner sent for, and as soon as that young lady entered the room and saw Gay and Professor Hamilton she knew that Nemesis had caught her up. Few people had ever seen the Professor in such a state of cold anger, and he put Veronica through a kind of "third degree" of questioning that before long elicited the fact that she had won her information by a low down mean method. One night when he had dined with her father and the two men had afterwards retired to the solicitor's private room, she had descended to the mean trick of an inquisitive housemaid and listened at the keyhole. She had not meant to use the information she had gleaned, being afraid that the weapon she held against Gay might, like a boomerang, come back and cause herself much mischief, but her jealousy had been too much for her and in a moment of irritation the thing had rushed to her lips beyond recall.

She was left in no doubt as to the opinion both the Professor and Miss Lancaster held concerning her conduct, and the latter intimated that this time she had gone too far and must be prepared to leave Rolsham Manor as soon as her father could be communicated with.

One creditable thing about Veronica Warner was that she dearly loved her father and valued his good opinion, and now she pocketed her pride and begged that he should not be told of her mean wrong-doing. But Miss Lancaster was firm and Rolsham Manor



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would have known the girl no more if Gay had not intervened and pleaded for her.

"After all," said Gay, "she told me the truth, and I would rather know the truth than go on living a kind of lie. Please let her stay, Miss Lancaster."

So Veronica was reprieved once more, though Miss Lancaster made it quite plain that it was only in deference to the wishes of the girl she had tried so hard to injure.

Gay had said she would rather know the truth, but knowing the truth took all the spirit out of her; she lost all the happy gaiety with which she had begun the new term and went about with a pale face and subdued manner, working almost feverishly at her tasks because some day, when she left school, she must earn her own living. She could not bear the thought of being dependent, even on "Uncle John."

Everybody has his or her better nature and Veronica's was stirred as it had never been before when she saw the havoc she had wrought for Gay. She had not realised how the other girl's pride would suffer through the revelation she had made, and wished many and many a time that she had never told the thing that Gay had never been meant to know. But spoken words can never return. Poor Gay and poor Veronica!

## CHAPTER XXII

### LETTICE BURFIELD'S STORY

BILL, the young doctor's reformed thief, leaned against the door-post of Daniel Burfield's cottage and looked down on his sister's bent head as she sat on the step ostensibly darning one of her little daughter's socks, but more often than not her hands holding their work lay idle in her lap.

"Lettice, you *must* tell what you know." Bill's voice was very earnest, but Lettice shook her head.

"I can't, Bill, I just can't," she said. "They'd never forgive me."

"Try them!" urged Bill. "They forgave me and let *me* have a chance that nobody else wouldn't give me. I don't b'lieve as they'd be hard on you."

"I can't," repeated Lettice, hardly above a whisper.

"Yes, you can," insisted Bill. "It was all very well when things were all right for her an' she thought how the Professor was her own uncle, but now she knows he ain't, things is very different. Even young Dan says the poor kid is lookin' downright ill. Lettice, supposin' somebody could make yer own little Daisy happy by sayin' a few words an' wouldn't say 'em."

"Oh, don't, Bill!" cried Lettice, hiding her face in her hands.

Bill said no more, and presently Lettice rose.

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"All right, Bill," she said, brokenly, "I'll tell."

"Good girl!" said Bill, and a little later the two stood before the door of the Grange, no longer a tumble-down ruin, but a charming house with gleaming white walls and cheerful green shutters.

The Professor, a little mystified, granted them an interview, and when he heard their astonishing story ordered the car and drove them to Yellowlea, to repeat the tale to its mistress.

Lettice had hardly begun when Mrs. Feltham, shaken out of her usual serenity, leaned forward and stopped her abruptly.

"*What* are you saying, woman?" she cried, hoarsely. "That my baby was *not* drowned as we all thought and that——"

"That the girl known as Gay Hamilton is really your own daughter. Yes, madam," said Lettice, "that is what I came to tell you and I know it's true."

"Go on," said the lady, covering her eyes with her hand and remaining motionless till the story was finished.

"The man I married first was nearly as bad as a man could be," went on Lettice, in a dull voice as though repeating a lesson. "He was a poacher among other things and once your husband, being a magistrate, gave him ~~six~~ months. When he came out of prison he urged me to marry him and go away to London. I knew what he was, but he was a handsome chap enough and I went with him. It was while we were in London that we ran across Bill here who was then not much better than my husband. One day my

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husband came back to our lodgings when he had been away nearly a week and brought a baby with him, a child only just able to toddle, and I knew at once that it was your little baby daughter. I had often seen her out with the nurse. He had stolen her out of revenge against your husband. He hung about till one day the nurse carelessly left the child alone in the perambulator. He crept out of hiding, turned the perambulator over on its side, dropped a little red shoe on the river bank and fixed the baby's little lace bonnet among the rushes lower down. He was clever, he was, for he meant to give the impression that the child had been drowned, that, by some means, the perambulator had fallen over, that the child had toddled off by itself to the river and fallen into the water."

"He succeeded," murmured Mrs. Feltham. "The river was dragged for three days, but it was in flood and none of us doubted that the little body had been washed out to sea. Go on."

"And all those three days," went on Lettice, "he had the child in that ruined old hut in the wood. Nobody suspected him, for nobody knew he was in the neighbourhood. When he reached London he was in high glee over the trick he had played on you and your husband, but after a while he grew afraid of being found out, and decided to go to Canada, and we took the child with us. Owing to his drinking habits he couldn't keep any job and we wandered about from place to place. He was always urging me to put the child into some orphanage or other, and I couldn't do it, and one night in desperation I walked miles and

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left the poor baby on the steps of the biggest house I could find. Soon after my husband was killed by a motor car and I applied for a situation on the ranch and was thankful to find that the child had been kindly treated and was perfectly happy. After a time I longed for England and home and came back here, and Daniel Burfield asked me to marry him. And—and then Gay Hamilton came to school here, but even then I wouldn't have told what I knew if she had not found out a-about it. Bill m-made me come—and oh, madam, what are you going to do with me?"

"For the first time, Mrs. Feltham uncovered her eyes and looked at the other woman, her own face a glory of wondering joy.

"Do with you? What do you mean?" she asked.

"A-Aren't you going to have me punished?" murmured poor Lettice.

"Punish the woman who has brought me such amazing news?" said Mrs. Feltham. "Why, my good girl, I cannot find words to thank you. But I know you will understand that, at the moment I can think of only one thing. Professor Hamilton, will you take me to my daughter?"

"There!" said Bill, when he and his sister were alone, didn't I tell you so? An' I warrant you're happier than you've bin for many a long day."

"Yes," answered Lettice, with a radiant smile, her heart lightened of a burden it had borne so long.

Gay was delighted when she was told that Mrs. Feltham was waiting to see her in the drawing-room,

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for she had not seen her since the holidays or since the trouble that had overwhelmed her.

She was surprised when she found the Professor there, too, and was more surprised when Mrs. Feltham laid her hands on her shoulders and gazed steadily at her a moment, then gathered her into her arms.

"My darling, my darling," she murmured, "how blind I have been. No wonder I loved you the moment I saw you, for your eyes are the eyes of your father. I'm your mother, darling."

"My m-mother!" gasped Gay and turned her eyes to where the Professor was looking at the little scene with a kindly smile.

"It's all right, my dear," he said, laughing outright, "she really is your own mother; there is no deception or mistake about it this time."

And then Gay listened with shining eyes as Lettice's story was repeated once more.

"Mother!" she whispered, "*Mother*," she said again, as though the very word had a sweet taste on her tongue, "It's almost too good to be true. I would rather have you for my mother than anyone in the whole wide world."

"And I am perfectly satisfied with my daughter," said her mother, kissing her once again.

"And it's all owing to you, Uncle John," said Gay, going to him and touching his arm, "for if you had not insisted upon bringing me to England and Rolsham Manor, Mother and I might never have found one another."

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"So I'm not such an old ogre after all, then," laughed the Professor.

"You are just the dearest uncle a girl could have," declared Gay, giving him a hug, "and I'm ashamed to have been such a silly little idiot."

"Never mind," smiled the Professor, "we are good friends now, eh, Gay?"

"The very best," answered Gay, and, with a whimsical smile turned to her mother.

"What is my name? Is it Gay?"

"No, it's Grace," answered her mother. "I rather think that when the Professor's brother found you on his doorstep, he probably asked you your name and 'Gay' was the nearest your baby tongue could get to it. I think on the whole, we'll continue to call you 'Gay'."

So Gay Hamilton was no longer a nameless foundling but the daughter of Mrs. Feltham, of Yellowlea, and the news soon ran through the school, and congratulations were showered upon her from all sides. Her own particular friends were delighted, for they knew how she had suffered these last few weeks, but perhaps Gay was most touched when Veronica sought her out and said how glad she was, and apologised handsomely for her conduct.

"I don't forget," said Veronica, "that if it hadn't been for you I should have been expelled and nearly broken father's heart, and I'm sorry I was such a beast to you."

"And I wasn't much better," said Gay, "but let's forgive and forget and be friends, shall we?"

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Veronica agreed eagerly, the erstwhile enemies shook hands and the last of Gay's animosities had vanished.

"Mother," said Gay, when she next went to Yellow-lea, "wasn't it queer that the first time I came here, when the boys found me in the wood I had a funny feeling that I had been in that bedroom before?"

"As a matter of fact," replied her mother, "that room used to be your day nursery, and there was a door that led into the night nursery. When we thought you were drowned we had it all altered."

"Um!" said Gay, "that accounts for it, then."



## CHAPTER XXIII

### LACROSSE

RADIANTLY happy, Gay settled down to school life with a greater zest than ever. Working steadily, yet without the feverish anxiety of the last few weeks—and therefore doing better work—she won golden opinions from all her teachers, and put all her heart into her play as well, much to the satisfaction of Jane Mainwaring, the games captain.

During the winter the school played hockey and lacrosse and a certain amount of tennis on the hard courts.

Gay had seen lacrosse played in Canada by men, but had never played herself, yet she knew a good deal about the game, and being particularly fleet of foot, took to it like a duck to water.

Many a vigorous game was played between the four houses and sometimes between forms, but the old foolish feeling between upper and lower fifth seemed to have disappeared, a good deal owing to the reconciliation that had taken place between Veronica and Gay.

One afternoon Mary Diana, Gay and Rufus, who were now inseparable friends, wandered down to the hard courts and, coming across Joyce, commandeered her for a game.

Early November though it was, it was as warm as it often is at the end of May.

"Whew!" said Mary Diana, waving her racket in front of her face as if it were a fan, "isn't it too hot for words? It's really warm enough to play cricket. I wish we could have a game. Such a pity we only have it during one term."

"Cricket is hardly a game you can play in *mud*," laughed Rufus, "and it's only once in a blue moon you get a day like this."

"Talking of cricket," said Mary Diana, "that match with the boys never came off."

"No," chuckled Gay, "I was only asking mother about it last time I went to tea, and she said that neither Miss Lancaster or the headmaster of the boys' school much cared for the idea, and there was no afternoon before the end of the term when it could be fitted in. But David and Jimmy say they'll bring it off next summer holidays, all being well. Mother is to put up the girls' eleven and Uncle John the boys at the Grange."

"Piffle!" remarked Rufus. "Things *put* off never *come* off."

"Hello, hello, there you are, Gay! I have been looking for you all over the place."

Jane Mainwaring hailed them in her cheery way.

"You want *me*?" asked Gay.

"Yes, my child," replied the games captain. "I'm in a bit of a quandary. Two of my team for the lacrosse match on Saturday are laid up. Ann has a shockingly bad cold and Matron won't let her play, and Nesta has just wrenched her ankle and can't play if she would."

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I have put Veronica in to take Ann's place and I want you to take Nesta's."

Gay flushed up with excitement.

"You mean you want me to play in the school team in the match against St. Aldyth's?"

"Exactly!" said Jane. "Any objection?"

"*Objection!*" answered Gay. "But are you sure I'm good enough?"

"Shouldn't ask you if I didn't think you'd do," said Jane. "Anyway, you're the best I can get just now. Mind you play up."

"I will," said Gay, with emphasis. "I should hate to let dear old Rolsham down."

"Hark to the damsel who said she would never do anything but hate Rolsham Manor," chuckled Mary Diana.

"Did she say that?" asked Jane. "Then she has very evidently come to her senses," and without waiting for any reply to her question, Jane swung off to watch and drill some girls who were having a hockey practice.

Gay was intensely excited at playing in the lacrosse match, and in the short time available put in as much practice as possible, but when the great day arrived and she stood in her appointed place while Jane Mainwaring and the rival captain were facing at the centre mark, she felt positively sick with nervousness and her limbs were fairly trembling. She was terrified lest her play would suffer, but when the ball was actually in play and the game really in full swing, she forgot all about her nerves and feelings and concentrated on doing her share of the work.

St. Aldyth's were a strong team; they had won every match so far, that they had played, and were determined, if possible, to continue the good work, and Rolsham found it all they could do at first to stem the rush and protect their goal. Presently they got going, and with a magnificent piece of team work and some clever passing were first to score, but ten minutes later St. Aldyth's equalised. Both sides had now settled down in earnest and up and down the ground the play swirled, but there was no further score at half-time, and the girls stopped for a breather, some of them refreshing themselves with lemon.

The play in the second half was, if possible, faster than in the first, both sides objected to leaving the result at an unsatisfactory draw, and were determined to force a decision. Up and down in constant motion, now one side getting possession of the ball now the other, running, running, running, with set, determined faces and eager, panting breathing; no time for dawdling in lacrosse, a game for those of swift, sure feet and sound hearts and lungs.

Ten minutes before the end there was a wild scrimmage just in front of the Rolsham goal; three times in scarcely more than the same number of seconds, the defender saved magnificently amidst the hurricane of cheers from her school-fellows. Then Jane got the ball and raced back up field with the others hard on her heels. Hard pressed she passed the ball to Gay, the fleet of foot. At top speed the new member of the Rolsham team sped away, eagerly pursued; there was just a chance that she might succeed in scoring

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on her own, but Gay had learned to play for her side and not for herself. She heard a tense "With you!" close by; a turn of the wrist, a flick of her crosse and the ball had gone, and it was Veronica who was flying with it towards the St. Aldyth's goal, almost before her opponents had discovered what had happened. Veronica raced on, the girl in the goal leaned forward, tense and steady, ready for the almost inevitable save; Rolsham Manor should not win if *she* could help it. Then Veronica, almost up to the white chalk line that she must not cross, instead of taking a chance at the goal, flashed it out to Gay, who had followed up, and quick as thought, Gay smashed it into the net before its defender had realised that she was marking the wrong girl.

There was a storm of cheering from the delighted Rolshamians and then once more the two captains were facing at the centre while the pairs of players stood in their places round the ring and the rest of the teams waited till the ball was once more in play. Up to the last moment the play was fast and eager, but no further goal was scored. Rolsham Manor had won by two to one.

Then the two captains went to the centre, their teams lined up behind them, and Rolsham Manor cheered St. Aldyth's and St. Aldyth's cheered Rolsham Manor, and then they scattered and there was a scamper towards the school for baths and tea.

“Bravo, kid!” said Jane Mainwaring, putting an arm round Gay's shoulders for a moment, as, hot and tired and dirty, but superlatively happy, they were all

crowding in at the side door, "you did splendidly. And you, too, Veronica. I am proud of the two new members of the team. I'll play you again."

And Veronica and Gay looked at one another and smiled happily and wondered why on earth they had ever hated one another so.

## CHAPTER XXIV

### "THE LONDONDERRY AIR"

ON the Saturday evening of the half-term holiday, instead of the girls providing the items for a concert, the staff elected to give an entertainment, much to the delight of their pupils.

The great hall was packed, for a considerable gathering of friends and neighbours had been invited, Mrs. Feltham and Professor Hamilton among them, and Gay was supremely happy to have them one on either side of her.

The items of the programme, songs and solos, part-songs and monologues were received with the greatest enthusiasm, and when, in a little play, Miss Lancaster appeared as a grey-haired old lady with a lace cap on her head and wearing a Spanish embroidered shawl there were delighted cheers, and peals of laughter when Miss Welham came on as a saucy, naughty boy who *would* steal apples.

Then there were scenes from *Cranford*, and when Miss Denver came into view in a charming poke bonnet with tiny rosebuds round her face and a lovely flowery gown with a prodigious crinoline, she brought down the house.

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“Who would have thought she could look so *lovely*?” sighed Rufus.

One item that was especially appreciated was Miss Graham’s violin playing.

There were “ohs” of admiration and a spontaneous burst of applause when she walked on in her pretty white evening frock.

And when she began to play, a wonderful stillness fell upon the company; everybody seemed to be intent on every clear, lovely note, and when the last one died away there was an appreciable pause before the storm of applause burst out. Of course she had to play again and a little sigh of pleasure ran through the room when she began the sweet plaintive notes of the “Londonderry Air.”

Everybody was remarking afterwards how beautifully she played it, and nobody knew that she was really playing it—in imagination—to a tall young Irishman with mahogany-coloured hair—who was not there.

Late that night, when all the girls had long wandered off into the land of dreams, the young science mistress stood by her window and gazed out at the bright frosty stars.

He had promised to come and hear her play, had especially asked her for the “Londonderry Air,” and then had been absent. Had he forgotten? Or had he felt disinclined to turn out again into the cold night after a long day’s work?

It was long after midnight before she slept, and it seemed to her that she had hardly closed her eyes when



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she was awakened by a slight sound. Something had rattled against her window. She listened intently and again it came—gravel was being thrown up to awaken her.

"Who is there?" she called softly, going to the window.

"Please, miss," answered young Dan Burfield's voice, "our Daisy is very ill, Dr. Terence has bin with her all night, an' he says will you come an' bring your fiddle?"

So he had *not* forgotten!

"Of course, Dan," she said aloud. "I'll be down in a few minutes."

It did not take her long to dress, and soon she was hurrying along by Dan's side, her violin-case in her hand.

In the little back room of the cottage Daisy lay in the bed, her head turning restlessly from side to side, her hands wandering constantly over the bed-clothes. Lettice and her husband with white, anxious faces sat in the background, and Dr. Terence rose from the bedside to meet the young teacher.

"I am sorry to send for you at this hour," he said gravely, speaking very low, "but Daisy has been pretty bad for several days and about seven last night took a turn for the worse. The trouble is she can't sleep, and it's the only thing to save her. Just now she cried out about her disappointment because she could not go and hear you play. She was to have gone with Dan. And the thought came to me that perhaps if you played, it might quiet her. Will you?"

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“Of course I will,” replied Miss Graham, and taking her violin out of its case, began to play hymns and old songs that she thought the child might know, and as she played the thin little face grew less strained and the restless movements almost ceased. Then she glided into the “Londonderry Air,” and as the lovely tender melody sang through the room, the child smiled and whispered, “Oh, lovely.” Then, with a little sigh of relief the eyelids closed, the breathing grew quieter and more regular and Daisy was almost asleep. When the last note died away, the doctor signed—“again,” and once more the haunting melody filled the room, while the doctor leaned still closer to the sick child, watching every breath and Dan—poor Dan—sat sideways on a chair in the shadows and buried his face in his arms along the back of it. Softer and softer the music sounded, then died away altogether and the young doctor rose and stepping noiselessly into the kitchen, signed to the player to follow.

He was sitting by the table his head in his hands but he raised it when she came to lay her violin down.

His face was pale and showed lines of weariness, his thick usually smoothly brushed hair was all ruffled up, the waviness he tried so hard to eliminate well in evidence; he looked rather like a tired boy, but his eyes were shining with triumph.

“Dorothy,” he said, taking the hand that hung by her side in both of his. “Dorothy, I believe you have done it—I believe you have *done* it. All night long I have done all I knew, with no effect. I dared not

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give her an opiate in her weak state, and I knew that unless she could sleep, the darling would probably slip away with the dawn. I was in despair, when I thought of you, and sent Dan; and your dear blessed music has saved her."

"I am glad," said Miss Graham, softly, "so very glad. But you must be very tired. Can't you go home now and get some rest."

The young doctor shook his head.

"Not for an hour or two," he said. "I must be quite sure."

"Then shall I make you a cup of tea?"

"Just what I'm longing for," said he.

So, while Dr. Terence tiptoed back to tell Lettice to call him if Daisy stirred, the young teacher prepared tea and as the two sat down together the level rays of the rising sun shone into the room, touching to pale gold the three perfect blooms on Dan's cherished chrysanthemum plant on the window sill, glowing in Lettice's shining pots and pans and making a glory of Dorothy Graham's hair. The child slept on, so presently the violinist with her instrument, returned to school and the usual daily round.

During afternoon school a note was brought to her and when she read it, the usually deft-handed science teacher dropped a book and stooped to pick it up, getting very red as she did so.

The note ran:

"Daisy has slept nearly all day, has taken a little nourishment and is certainly out of danger, and all

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owing to you and your heavenly music. I know you will be as glad as I am.

“T. O’C.

“P.S. We’ll have the organist play ‘Londonderry Air’ at the wedding, shall we?”

## CHAPTER XXV

### • "SO THAT'S SETTLED"

• THAT evening Miss Graham made her way to Miss Lancaster's room, having an appointment with her to look over various question papers for the end-of-term examinations. She moved in leisurely fashion, for the headmistress had been out and might possibly be a little late.

As she opened the door and entered, a tall figure rose from the depths of an arm-chair, and the young doctor came across the room, took her in his arms and kissed her.

"So *that's* settled," he remarked in tones of satisfaction.

• "What is settled?" asked Miss Graham.

"Why," he replied, "that one of these days when I have more than tuppence ha'penny to bless myself with, you are going to be Mrs. Terence O'Connor."

"You haven't asked me yet."

"Glory be," exclaimed the young doctor, with laughter in his voice. "Does the darling want me to go down upon me knees and strike me breast and say 'Be mine, oh fair lady of me heart'?"

"No," said she, with a tiny smile, "but——"

• The laughter left Terence's eyes, he laid his hands on her shoulders and spoke softly and earnestly, his brogue well in evidence.

“Is it that ye are wantin’ to know if I love ye, acushla? I wish that I could find the words that would be telling ye how much ye mean to me——”

At that moment his Irish eloquence came to a full stop, for the door opened and in walked his aunt.

“Terence!” she said. “What are you doing here? I did not expect you this evening.”

Then she looked from one radiant young face to the other, and coming towards them, laughed softly.

“I knew it must come,” she said, “but I did not expect it so soon.”

First she drew Terence down and kissed him, then took the girl in her arms.

“You are just the wife I would have chosen for this harum-scarum boy of mine,” she said.

“Isn’t it a lucky spalpeen that I am?” said Terence. “A girl like her to take a poverty-stricken penniless medico!”

“Perhaps you won’t always be penniless,” smiled his aunt.

“Indeed and I won’t,” answered her nephew. “I’m going to *work*. I’ll be in Harley Street among the nobs in next to no time.”

“I didn’t mean that,” said his aunt.

• “See here!” said Terence, shaking his finger at her. “It’s no good you hinting that you have remembered us in a corner of your will; we’ll both be bald and toothless and ugly—oh no we won’t, at least *you* won’t, mavourneen——” he broke off to say, drawing Dorothy to him, “You’ll always be lovely, even if you live to a hundred and ten.”

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"Supposing you take yourself and your rhapsodies off," laughed Miss Lancaster. "You can have just five minutes in the garden to look at the moon and say good night to Dorothy, and then Miss Graham must come back and go through these papers with me."

"Dragon!" said Terence, stooping to drop a kiss on her cheek. "I can see Dorothy and I are not going to see much of one another with a martinet like you around."

Then he took Dorothy's arm and they disappeared through the window into the garden, where presumably he continued the flow of eloquence that had been interrupted by his aunt's entrance.

Dorothy was only two minutes after the allotted time and the two women sat side by side but did not commence work at once.

"Terence talks of reaching Harley Street," said Miss Lancaster, "but what he really wanted to do was research work in bacteriology. He wanted, as he put it, 'to get on the track of the rheumatic bug.' I am afraid he is not an orthodox conventional doctor. He lost father and mother when he was a baby and my brother brought him up, and everybody thought would leave him a considerable fortune. But when my brother died he had bought him this practice and that was all. There was two hundred pounds a year for me and no mention in the will of any other money. He expressed a wish that Terence should stay here three years, and the boy has loyally abided by his uncle's wish. The three years will be up at Christmas time. What he will do then——"

Miss Lancaster stopped and smiled at her companion.

“I think,” she added, “he will get a surprise.”

The next morning young Dan asked to see Miss Graham, and when she appeared thrust something into her hands.

“Please, miss, will you have these?”

Dorothy Graham undid some tissue paper wrappings and disclosed three perfect chrysanthemum blooms.

“Dan,” she exclaimed, almost with dismay in her voice, “they are your beautiful prize flowers. Oh, why did you cut them?”

“‘Cos—’cos I wanted you to have ‘em. I ain’t got nothin’ else to give you.”

“But, Dan, dear boy,” said the teacher, “you have spoilt your chance at the show next week. You would almost certainly have won a prize for a cottage grown plant.”

“That don’t matter,” muttered Dan. “Daisy’s worth more’n any old prize, an’ you saved her an’——.”

Here Dan brushed his sleeve across his eyes and fairly ran away.

Dorothy touched the snowy petals of the flowers almost reverentially and took them to Miss Lancaster’s room.

- When the headmistress heard their story she went to a cabinet and brought out a lovely old Sèvres vase.

“Put them in this, dear,” she said. “Nothing less is worthy to hold them; they are more than beautiful flowers; they are Love and Gratitude and Sacrifice.”



## CHAPTER XXVI

### HOME FOR THE HOLIDAYS

EXAMINATIONS were in full swing and the girls, for most of whom it had been a hard-working term, were now putting their best into these final tests of the last few weeks.

Gay had worked steadily of late and had the satisfaction of feeling that she was doing credit to herself and her teachers; but she was surprised to learn that she, as well as Mary Diana and Rufus, had earned a remove, and, next term, would be in the upper fifth.

And how proud she was on Prize Day when she received two beautifully bound books at the hands of her mother who was giving away the prizes, one for being first in French, and the other for the best essay.

That was a memorable Prize Day, for, at the end of the ceremony, Miss Lancaster made known to the girls the fact that her nephew and the young science mistress were engaged to be married.

The girls were thrilled and gave the young doctor and their beloved "Dolly Dimples" three very hearty cheers and insisted upon speeches from both of them.

A most satisfactory ending to a happy term!

When all the girls were safely in bed Miss Lancaster sat in her own room with her nephew and Dorothy

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Graham, and revealed a secret that she had kept for three years.

The uncle who had brought up Terence O'Connor had not died a poor man, after all. He had dearly loved the boy he had adopted, but, realising that he had a too-impulsive side to his nature had feared that if the somewhat harum-scarum Terence came into undisputed control of money before he had settled down to steady work, he might not settle down at all. So he had bought the practice near the school where Terence might be under the eye of his aunt, who was to allow the money to accumulate for three years and then use her own discretion. With interest she had watched the development of the steadier side of his character, his choice of Dorothy Graham had pleased her immensely, and now that the three years of probation had come to an end, she had no hesitation in handing over to the care of Terence himself the money she knew her brother had always meant him to have eventually.

After all, Dorothy Graham was not marrying a "poverty-stricken penniless medico."

The next morning Rolsham Manor was all excitement and bustle as bus after bus of laughing eager girls departed for the station.

Gay was thrilled at the thought of going home for the holidays for the first time in her life, home to a mother who loved her so dearly, "the darlingest mother in all the world." Surely few girls had so much for which to be thankful.

What absolutely happy holidays they were, too.

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One of the special pleasures was that she was able to ride again. It was sheer joy to be in the saddle once more; to know the ecstasy of being borne swiftly over the ground by the eager animal beneath her; to feel the rush of air against her glowing cheeks, the blood racing in her veins with exercise and excitement.

Almost every morning Uncle John and David rode over to Yellowlea, and the four would canter out to the meadows, the two younger members of the party often having wild races that were beyond the more sedate pair.

"So he *didn't* tear you up by the roots out of your native soil," were David's first words the first time he saw Gay after her identity as Grace Feltham had been established, "and he *didn't* ruin your life, and, I presume, you *don't* loathe him."

"No, I *don't*," replied Gay, "if you mean Uncle John. I love him as much as you do. So there! I'm not ashamed of changing my mind, and I *knew* you'd say 'I told you so.'"

"But I haven't," said David.

"You implied it."

"I only stated a fact——" began David.

"Oh, never mind," put in Gay, "don't let's argue. I want to ask you something."

"Ask away."

"Did you know I wasn't really your cousin that day in Scotland when you suggested we should be chums?"

"Of course, I did," answered David. "Uncle John wrote and told me about it three weeks after you

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arrived at Rolsham Manor. He had to go to Canada to try and find out the truth. That was why I was at Yellowlea with Macrae when the mumps business was on."

"And he left all his own affairs to go all that way just for me," murmured Gay.

"He was away longer than he expected," went on David, "because things were in such a muddle. That old woman and her son that your fath—that ~~any~~ other uncle trusted so, had been cheating him for years, the whole place was almost ruined."

"And those were the people I wanted to stay with instead of coming to England," sighed Gay. "What an idiot I was! It was *nice* of you, David, to want to be friends with a nameless little foundling who might quite easily have been what Veronica called, a 'wretched little gipsy brat'."

"Of course I wanted to be friends," averred David. "I knew you were a jolly nice girl even though you *were* such a horrid, gloomy, bad-tempered, silly little monkey."

"Well—of all the cheek!" said Gay, indignantly.

But David laughed his own gay, disarming laugh and touched her elbow.

• "Little Miss Spitfire!" he said softly, then suddenly changed the subject.

"Say, how old is your mother?" he asked.

"Mother?" said Gay. "Oh—thirty-six, thirty-seven next May."

• "And Uncle John will be thirty-seven next month," remarked David, glancing back at the other two riders.

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"Well, what about it?" asked Gay.

"Nothing!" replied David, with a grin. "Come on! I'll race you to that rounded rock."

And away went the two horses side by side, racing at top speed, urged on by two eager riders with hand and voice and knee.

"Glorious! Absolutely glorious!" gasped Gay, almost as breathless with laughter as with the exercise ~~when~~ they drew rein beside the rock and turned to revel in the magnificent view.

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## CHAPTER XXVII

### A HAPPY GATHERING

WHEN David Hamilton came of age a happy house party met at his Scottish home. To the huge delight of David and Gay, Mrs. Feltham had become Mrs. John Hamilton nearly three years ago, and Gay's mother was acting as hostess.

The Professor having migrated to Yellowlea, he did not require the Grange any longer, so Dr. and Mrs. Terence O'Connor moved into the once tumble-down, half-ruined old house, where, as Macrae put it, the doctor could "muck about with stinks and bugs to his heart's content," in the laboratory. The villagers were delighted not to lose their beloved "young doctor," for they still called him young—though he declared he had discovered two grey hairs on his temples—and his radiant young wife was almost as beloved as he was. Not the least happy person at the Grange was Bill, the one-time ne'er-do-well, who had been transferred from Yellowlea to be head gardener to the man for whom he would cheerfully have given his life.

Both Terence and Dorothy had come to grace David's party as well as the Macraes, Mary Diana, and Peter, Rufus and her brother Jimmy and a few more young people, David's special friends.

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Gay had changed very little; she was still small for her age and very slim, Mary Diana was half a head taller, as charming as ever, and they made a delightful pair as, just before dinner, being down early, they stood together in their pretty evening frocks by the pleasant but scarcely necessary wood fire that burned cheerily in the wide hearth of the beautiful old hall.

They were discussing the fact that next term would be their last at Rolsham Manor. Gay was now both captain of the school and games captain and "loved every blessed stick and stone of the dear old place" as dearly as Mary Diana had prophesied she would that memorable day when she had first arrived at Rolsham, a disgruntled, sullen, never-going-to-be-happy-again girl from overseas. How long ago it seemed! How much had happened!

"Don't those two boys look nice!" remarked Gay, as David Hamilton and Jimmy Macrae came stepping down the wide shallow stairs arm in arm, laughing and talking gaily as they came.

"Yes," agreed Mary Diana, with a sigh. "That's just one thing that makes me wish that the Allertons were Scottish, then Peter could wear that lovely evening get-up. There is something most attractive about the black and white of the top part and the kilt and bare knees and stockings and buckle shoes and that dear little dagger of the rest."

"It is the kilt that does it," murmured Gay. "There's a kind of ripple and swing about it when a boy moves that makes you feel all quirly-whirly *here*," touching

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herself over the heart, "but a good deal depends on the boy. I shouldn't like Robert Dalton in a kilt, frinstance."

"No," said Mary Diana, slowly. "Neither should I. But he looks very nice as he is; for here he comes."

"So he does! My!" gasped Gay in amazement, "did you ever see anybody improve so much?"

It was indeed Robert Dalton who was following the other two boys down the stairs; having arrived just in time to dress for dinner, and Gay was right, he had altered almost beyond recognition.

Under the close friendship and almost constant companionship of David Hamilton and Jimmy Macrae, first at school and then at Cambridge, he had blossomed wonderfully, developing in more than looks and manners, for he had been one of the fastest, most famous half-backs the old school had ever known and was more likely than not to play for the University.

He would never have David's debonair charm, and his face would always have something rugged about it, but he had lost his awkward shyness, and looked what Rufus would have called, "strong and trustable."

He made a bee-line for Mary Diana, his face wearing the smile that so softened it, and took both her hands in his.

"I am so glad to meet you again," he said, in a deep pleasant voice. "I have never forgotten how kind you were, that night at Macrae's, to a clumsy



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lout who didn't know what to do with his hands and feet."

"You seem to know what to do with your hands *now* all right!" remarked Macrae with his head on one side.

Such a remark in the old days would have made Dalton blush to the roots of his hair and long for an earthquake to swallow him out of sight, but now, in spite of the fact that the rest of the house party had gathered round, and there was a ripple of laughter at Jimmy's sally, he did not change colour in the slightest, only smiled again that beautiful smile and, before releasing Mary Diana's hands, raised one of them and touched her fingers lightly with his lips.

"Well, well, well," said Macrae, with a prodigious sigh, "I couldn't have done that better myself. Let me try, Rufus."

But Rufus flicked an airy finger and thumb at him as the gong sounded for dinner.

After dinner the younger members of the party elected to go out and watch the sun which at that time of year and in that latitude set very late.

Passing out, David snatched up his plaid and wrapped it round Gay.

"Get's chilly in the evenings up here," he said, "summer though it is, and I want you to come to the old castle; the sunset will be magnificent from there."

"Do you know, little chum," he added, as, a little later, they stood within the ruined walls of the ancient home of his ancestors, looking out across the sea to the

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glowing western sky, "I believe that if only we could see far enough, we should be looking straight at the ranch."

"I suppose so," murmured Gay. "David," she added, turning to look at him, "have you ever thought of selling it?"

"No," answered David, "I am keeping it—for you."

"You're a dear, David, to think of it," said Gay, softly, "but I'm not sure that I want to go back—I was very happy there and shall always have a tender spot for Canada, but——"

"You mean you love Canada but you love England better still," assisted David, with that understanding laugh of his.

Gay laughed, too, and hugged herself together in the plaid.

"I think I found out long ago," she said, "that I entirely agree with Dan Burfield, who always declares that there ain't no finer place than England in all the world."

"Except Scotland!" chuckled David.

"Except Scotland!" nodded Gay, "This little bit of it, anyway."

• And then silence fell between these two very good friends as they leaned side by side on the thick broken wall and watched the marvellously vivid colours in the sky fade to lovely greys and blues and mauves, till here and there a star glimmered in the translucent sky and the sound of Dorothy O'Connor's violin called them back to the others.

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"*Such* a happy day!" murmured Gay with a sigh of deep content.

"The happiest ever," agreed David as they turned their faces towards the now lighted up old house where so many of the dear people they loved most were gathered together under one roof.

Suddenly the soft liquid notes of the violin changed to a merry lilting tune and the two young people, laughing and hand in hand, raced the rest of the way, and soon were participating with whole-hearted zest in a joyous, energetic, yet graceful reel.

"No longer 'Miss Spitfire'!" remarked the Professor as he and Dr. Terence stood together watching the animated scene.

"No," agreed the doctor, with a smile at Gay's happy face. "But she had to make a fight for it, and Rolsham Manor has reason to be proud of what it has done for her."

THE END









